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GEORGE WENDERN GAVE A PARTY

GEORGE WENDERN GAVE A PARTY

BY

JOHN INGLIS

*Hans Breitmann gife a barty—
Vhere ish dot barty now?*

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GEORGE WENDERN GAVE
A PARTY

CHAPTER I

BUT the party comes far on in the story.

When George Wenders had realised that the details of the house in Princes Gate bothered him, he engaged Mrs. Berwick to look after them. This was how she came to be seated at a writing-table in the morning-room going through a pile of tradesmen's books. Beside her was a bowl of roses with the breath of summer in them, though as yet it was only spring; she stooped over them, delighting in the luxury of their being there more than in their beauty. The French window stood wide open, letting in the sunshine and the sweet still air. Two steps led down to a small flower-garden, with a light iron fence and a little gate marking out its boundary; beyond the gate was the well-mown lawn, common to the tenants of all the houses. The room itself was furnished in a manner that suggested wealth and a certain amount of refinement; and Mrs. Berwick looked almost, not quite, like the right person to be in it.

She was fairly young; there were days when she might have been thirty, others when the lines about her mouth suggested the nearness of forty; pleasant-looking without being exactly pretty, a

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pile of light-brown hair on the top of her head, and eyes that were blue or green or grey, it depended on the shadows; occasionally, but only for a moment, there was an expression in them that was shifty and adventurous, or anxious and questioning, the outcome probably of remembered struggles and worries. Her figure was good, her waist small, her dress well-made; on her wrist she wore a blue enamel watch bracelet fastened with a leather strap, on her fingers a few rings of no particular value; altogether she made an agreeable addition to the room.

But she appeared to be uneasy. She opened a book and looked at it, evidently to gain time, put down some make-believe notes on the blotting-paper in front of her, and then suddenly, with an air of bewilderment and boredom, glanced at her sister, Mrs. Rigg, who sat on a sofa patiently waiting. It was only half-past ten. Relations had no business to come so early, she thought, or to come at all, unless they knew how to dress and look prosperous.

Mrs. Rigg looked dowdy, she obviously belonged to the middle class, she was forty-five, her manner was conciliatory, nimble, and a little nervous.

“I’m always so busy in the morning,” Mrs. Berwick explained. “I wish you had come at some other time—and written first.”

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"I thought I should be sure to catch you, that he would have gone to his office."

"Sometimes he doesn't go to the office at all." Mrs. Berwick looked at her sister's hands, they were thick-fingered and ugly, then down at her own which were white and shapely; she considered them a good asset.

"What does he do?" Mrs. Rigg's voice was a pleasantly inquiring one.

"I don't know, and I don't care," Mrs. Berwick was almost snappy; as if ashamed of it, she went over to the couch and sat down by her visitor. "I can give you five minutes more," she said in a kinder tone, "then you must go; you do understand, don't you, dear?" She put out her hand and felt the texture of Mrs. Rigg's brown skirt. "You mustn't mind my saying it."

"Of course not. Is he at home then?"

"I don't know. He came down to breakfast quite early, I think he went for an hour's ride—but he generally comes in at this time to arrange things for the day."

"Do you see much of him?"

"No. But I always use that writing-table, he calls it mine, and I'm always here in the morning ready for him. He likes this room, you see it leads out to the garden," Mrs. Berwick gave a significant smile, which conveyed nothing to Mrs. Rigg;

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“do put on your gloves, your hands look so”—she hesitated—“so bad.”

Mrs. Rigg was rather offended, “I have had to work, and my hands show it.”

“I know, dear, you’ve been splendid.”

“And I’m going directly.”

“Perhaps you had better,” Mrs. Berwick tried to say it reluctantly. “If he comes in he doesn’t expect to find any of my friends here.”

“Of course not,” Mrs. Rigg meekly agreed.

“I’ve been trying to come and see you; but it’s such a long way and I’ve had so much worry with my clothes.”

“You always look nice, somehow.”

“I wish I did. Mercifully Princes Gate is a good address, and if one walks into a big shop with an air, gives enough trouble and is sufficiently insolent, it’s possible to get credit for a few things; but of course my name isn’t in the directory as living here, and bills do come in—it’s dreadful.”

“I’m so sick of bills.”

“We all are. I hope Fred’s going on all right?” Fred was Mr. Rigg. “He must have missed you all that time you were at Herne Bay.”

“He did, and he was out such a long time—and we had so many expenses.”

Mrs. Berwick felt that the tone had meaning in it, and said quickly, “I know, I’d help you if I

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could, but everything's so difficult." Her voice was a fighting one, though it was soft and human.

The battle of life had told on both sisters. On Mrs. Rigg outwardly: it accounted for her make-shift clothes, her scanty badly done hair, the lines on her face, her thin throat and nervous hands; obviously she was poor, and tried hard not to be envious of her more presentable sister.

On Mrs. Berwick it had told inwardly; for she looked fairly prosperous and she had kept some sort of pace with the world. She had always been to theatres, or at any rate could talk about them, about people, fashion, politics, music, in fact anything; but she had grown self-regarding, and her manner suggested an anxiety to do the best she could for herself. Yet there were charming things latent in her nature. And she had sentiment. Long ago it had caused her to marry a drunken lout, a man whose family had discarded him to live on such borrowings as he could get. She had loved him, tried to reform him, been beaten, sworn at, disgusted, but all the time she was faithful to him. She grieved for him when he died, hating herself for the underlying relief it was; she had worn deep and extremely becoming mourning for him, feeling it to be his due, that it was not paid for made it seem curiously appropriate. After an interval which she considered decent (she had a

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sincere respect for the amenities), she set out with undaunted determination to get her own living. There had been many phases, but they were of no importance now that she had arrived at Princes Gate. "I live here in every luxury," she told her sister after a pause, "but I haven't a shilling in my pocket."

"You look as if you had pounds."

"I know. One must do that."

"Don't Cyril's relations do anything for you?"

"Nothing. Lady Berwick gave me to understand they never would. They sent me some cast-off clothes at first and invited me to luncheon now and then, and generally offered to drive me afterwards so that they might drop me and get rid of me, which they did with great readiness. The only money they gave me was to advertise for a post, and then they insisted on my cutting out the advertisement and sending it to them. It's no good counting on me for I'm broke, my dear, stony-broke."

"But surely you get a good deal from Mr. Wendern? He must be rich?"

"I don't know."

Mrs. Rigg looked round. "The things in this room are very handsome."

"I wonder sometimes what they'll fetch when they're second-hand."

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Mrs. Rigg turned upon her sister quickly, here was a clue to a situation from which she felt herself excluded, "Are you anxious about him?"

"Not precisely anxious; but I wish I knew more about him. You see he comes from Australia——"

"I never like Colonials, you can't measure them in any way."

"He's not a bit like one. I believe his father rolled in money, and I'm sure I hope he does." Mrs. Berwick was silent for a moment before she added with a sigh, "But he's so absent and dreamy and inconsequent, you can't tell. He's mixed up with a syndicate, that's why he goes to an office, but he never says anything about it."

"Does he know much about you?"

"Nothing. I am one of those women, my dear, who don't talk about themselves: they are few and wise."

"You never told me how you got here. It was while I was away, I was so surprised. How did you manage it?"

"Through an advertisement."

"But didn't you make any inquiries about him?"

"None. I was so sick of putting it in:—'A young widow, thirty-two——'"

"And a little more," Mrs. Rigg gave a quick laugh.

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Mrs. Berwick's tone showed that it annoyed her. She went on severely, “‘highly accomplished, accustomed to the best society, wishes to find a post as lady-housekeeper to a gentleman of position. Is accustomed to manage servants, has travelled, can ride and drive. Highest references, salary no object.’ I spent four pounds on that advertisement and only had three answers.”

Mrs. Rigg was much interested, she was so seldom given particulars of her sister's doings. “What were the other two?”

“One was from a clergyman in Lincolnshire: sixty-five if he was a day and a water-drinker. Temperance people ought to be taxed, then if they didn't help the revenue in one way they would in another. I came away and nearly took to my bed.” She stopped for a moment. “The other was from a young idiot in Piccadilly who had inherited a large fortune on coming of age; but it was spent before he answered my advertisement. He had a bad complexion, and asked what my Christian name was. I told him I couldn't come without a chaperon,” she laughed at the remembrance; “he was immensely relieved when I took my departure.”

“And the third was Mr. Wendern?”

Mrs. Berwick nodded. “He received me with a deference for which I could have kissed him;

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unfortunately it wasn't possible. He explained that he wanted a lady to look after his house, order dinner, able to head a table if necessary, and that he liked things done so that they could be seen with the naked eye. He said nothing about salary," Mrs. Berwick added regretfully; she was rather enjoying the confidences to her sister now that she was well into them.

"And you didn't?"

"I felt that even to mention it would imply that I belonged to a lower set than the one to which he evidently thought I belonged."

"Still, I should have given him a hint——"

"Let me arrange my own affairs, Maria. I fear I shall not be here much longer, for he is devoted to Miss Fiffer, a great American heiress. She lives ten doors off round the corner, you can see her windows," she nodded towards the garden, "and they meet every day; I believe they only took the house to be near him. If he marries her I shall be dispensed with, but meanwhile I shall gain nothing by worrying him; only to be sent away perhaps, to advertise again in the daily papers——" the door opened, she repressed a start, "Oh, Rogers, what is it?" as the butler entered.

"Mr. Bulson would like to speak to you, ma'am."

"Mr. Bulson? let me see, oh yes, the wine mer-

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chant, ask him to come in.” She turned hurriedly to her sister when Rogers had gone, “You must go, dear.”

“Of course, I quite understand,” they kissed each other, “remember our new address, 19 Cranberry Gardens, Hammersmith.”

“Yes, of course. Good-bye, dear. I’ll do what I can, you know I always play up if it’s possible.”

“I know you do.” One sister went meekly out while the other sister sat down by the writing-table and became absorbed in the household books till the door opened again.

Mr. Bulson was a gentlemanlike man with a tall hat which he carried in his hand, he wore a frock-coat and grey trousers; his appearance suggested church on Sunday as well as commercial activity on week-days.

“Good-morning, madam,” he said.

Mrs. Berwick raised her eyes with a slightly abstracted air and answered coldly, “Good-morning, Mr. Bulson.”

They looked at each other for a moment. “I have come about our account,” he said.

She smiled with surprise. “Your account?”

“It is very considerable, and we should like to see it paid.”

“Paid? It will be paid when Mr. Wendern has time to remember it.”

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“We have sent him a good many letters on the subject,” he said firmly.

“Which was very unwise of you. You have lost an excellent customer,” her tone was almost confidential.

“I should be sorry to think that.”

“But you have—” she shook her head regretfully.

“Oh well—” Then an idea evidently struck him. He looked round and hesitated. “Could you, my dear madam, in strict confidence, of course, tell us anything about Mr. Wendern’s position?”

“Position?” she seemed a little bewildered; he wondered whether it was innocence or bluff.

“Perhaps you will allow me to sit down for a moment?” He felt that the interview was becoming interesting.

She nodded; he took the chair on the other side of the writing-table; his manner was still deferential; but she knew perfectly that he had made inquiries as to her position in the house. “I understand that you are Mr. Wendern’s adviser and manager here. I need hardly say that to a firm like ours immediate payment of an account is of no consequence; but we want to be assured that it is safe—”

“A millionaire’s account!”

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Mr. Bulson looked round again. "A millionaire doesn't live as quietly as he does now, for he has drawn in this year. We very seldom see his name in the newspapers—at fashionable parties for instance."

"He is tired of them. He goes to the opera a good deal, he is always out, and—" she stopped, for she had not the least idea where he went. "He likes the opera," she added lamely.

"I saw him there the other night with an extremely handsome young lady—and her mother, I presume? But I made inquiries and found it was their box, not his."

"They have taken one for the season; it was Mrs. Fiffer's box; her daughter is an immense heiress," she added significantly.

"Humph—I see, but I have an idea that the reason Mr. Wendern does not entertain now is that he feels the necessity for retrenchment, the tiredness may be only an excuse."

Mrs. Berwick was surprised and a little hurt. "He said, quite lately, that he wanted to live as a man should who was well-off, but with only Colonial money. I think he dislikes ostentation."

"May I take it that your own presence here is a proof that he is at any rate well-off?"

She gave a quick nod that reassured her listener. He took her to be more worldly than she was, her

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clear eyes seemed to him to be accustomed to gather in main chances. "Thank you." He rose to go. "We should be sorry to lose his custom——"

"It would be a pity," she gravely agreed. "I feel sure that you will get a cheque when he remembers to write it, or is reminded at the right moment." She turned towards the writing-table.

"Thank you, madam." He stopped when he was half-way to the door; his manner became a shade more familiar. "If there is any friend of yours, or"—as if he were afraid of being untactful—"any charitable case in which you are interested, we should be delighted if you would allow us to send a little champagne, or a dozen of invalid port—to anyone in fact who has gained your sympathy."

"How very thoughtful of you, Mr. Bulson," she said, "but I shouldn't like to take advantage of your kindness."

"The kindness would be on your side." He waited and a little smile came to his eyes.

"There is a poor soul I'm much interested in. She has a delicate chest and suffers dreadfully from bronchitis. She lives at 19 Cranberry Gardens, Hammersmith. I feel sure a little champagne would be a blessing to her, would prolong her life perhaps——"

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“I’m sure it would.”

“She likes it very dry.”

“It shall be sent.” He took out a note-book.

“19 Cranberry Gardens, Mrs. Rigg, very dry. It shall be attended to at once.”

“It’s very kind of you.” She held out her hand. He shook it cordially. “That poor thing is so delicate.”

“I hope it will do her good.” He departed brisk and satisfied.

Mrs. Berwick put her elbows on the table and rested her face in her hands. “I would give anything in the world to know,” she thought. “Oh, I wonder, I wonder—” The door opened and Rogers entered with the air that meant another dun.

“The newsagent has sent for his account again.” He put it down on the table.

“How much is it?” She had recovered in a moment; her manner was admirable.

“Nineteen pounds seventeen and twopence. ‘The Times’ and four other dailies, including the evening—”

She pushed the bill away and bent over her books as if she had no time for such trifling. “Take it away and tell him that Mr. Wendern never writes a cheque for less than twenty-five.”

“Very well, ma’am, I’ll tell him.”

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She could have groaned with relief as he shut the door. But it amused her too, for after all, on a smaller scale, this was only the situation of the first days of her marriage. She had rather liked putting off the duns then: it was a new experience, and she took it to be characteristic of the higher social plane on which her husband had placed her. Later, when she had been a drudge, a hungry dreading creature hiding from the man whose habits were in a measure a revelation to her, she had played the game of outwitting creditors with desperation instead of amusement. "I don't believe this billet will last long," she said to herself. "I wonder whether he is a millionaire or a beggar—or an impostor?" She shook her head at the last word, as if to discount it. "If only that backwoodsman would come again, I could find out."

The "backwoodsman," as she called him, had appeared on the scene a few days before—one Joe Parker. Mrs. Berwick gathered that he had known Wendern out in Australia. A little talk with him might set her doubts at rest. She had only spoken to him for a minute, for though Wendern had introduced her, when she had made some remark about the weather she had to discreetly vanish. But she had seen that the friends liked each other. They went out together, and Wendern remarked

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the next morning that Parker would turn up again in a day or two. A rough diamond, but somehow she felt him to be a real one. She awaited his second visit with interest: it was a detail that she had discovered his eyes to be very blue, and had seen in them, when he looked at her, an expression that she felt to be pleasant admiration or friendliness.

CHAPTER II

EVERY one had met George Wendern five years ago. He was supposed to be a millionaire, and had come from the other side of the world. But little besides was known of him. He never talked of himself—nor of anything much as a rule; but it was wonderful how expressive people found his silence: women did especially, and ran after him trying to beguile him to their dinner-parties and their week-ends in the country. He went everywhere for a season, at first curiously and then reluctantly, arriving late and leaving early, till the time came when he refused most things for fear of forgetting them later. During his first year in London he frequently gave parties himself, occasionally he gave one in the second year; but it was noticed that he looked on at them with an air of not much interested surprise, almost as if he were making an experiment he did not find exciting. They were done well, but carelessly managed; of the applause that was heaped on them, the eagerness to come to them, he appeared to be unconscious, or, if told of it, amused and incredulous. There was a curious fascination about him. He was three-and-thirty perhaps,

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fairly tall, silent and reserved, with sometimes an almost uncanny look in his soft dark eyes and a smile that came seldom, but that gave evidence of the charm and almost simplicity of his nature. He seemed to be looking on at life, a little mystified at what he saw, to be expecting, waiting, for some meaning to develop itself, of his own share in it at any rate, and, till it came, to be holding himself back, reserving some latent force.

The queer thing was that Wendern appeared first under the auspices of Christopher Lant. Lant was a vulgar man, stout, easy, and good-natured, immensely rich, or reputed to be, who was taken on his face value when he suddenly came from nowhere, a man who knew everybody, but nobody knew how; and went everywhere, no one knew why—for a time. He lent money to men if they gave him a chance, sent flowers and opera-boxes to women, chocolates and mechanical toys to children, entertained lavishly, subscribed to charities, and just as it was beginning to be said that he was a speculator, a company promoter, extravagant in small sums while he harvested big ones for his own benefit, he introduced George Wendern, who was at least ten years his junior, and had an altogether different personality. People wondered how the two men came to be friends, and were told that they had known each other in

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the colonies; but it was remarked that Wendern's manner was always a little distant, as if the intimacy, if it could be called one, were forced, and at the elder man's ostentatious parties, his dinners, theatre-goings, and suppers, he was never to be seen.

Just before Lant went away—he was of the type that always discreetly goes away—the prospectus of the Bangor Estates Syndicate appeared. He flourished about it a good deal, and persuaded Wendern not only to put many thousands into it, but to become its managing director in England, as he himself was in Australia. Wendern resented the one or two titled guinea-pigs whose names were mixed up with it; but Lant told him this was necessary in England, and it never occurred to him, since he trusted his friends as a matter of course, to doubt Lant's good faith. Lant put all sorts of people into the Syndicate, and some who knew Wendern followed them; for if Wendern had no intimate friends, many people were attracted by him—even those who only came accidentally into contact with him felt his curious magnetism.

He was rather amused at being “boss” of the English office. Money had never been a difficulty to him: it had come and gone so easily, and come again with never any embarrassment to him, that

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the responsibility of managing it, of having to do with money belonging to other people, and of its actual necessity to himself, never occurred to him. Once in the long years ago, before he could remember anything, his people had been poor; but it hadn't mattered: poverty under a blue sky, where necessities are few and luxuries as scarce as undesired, and good fellowship a matter of course, is a different thing from poverty in a city.

When he first came to England he took a suite of rooms at the Carlton, but after a time he resented the other people in the hotel. The eating and drinking, the dresses of the women, the inane expression of the men—this was in his second London season—irritated him. He used to see them when he returned from a lonely stroll over Putney Bridge, or to Richmond, where the windings of the Thames, glimmering through the darkness, had an unceasing fascination for him. Later, for a little space, it occurred to him to investigate the Embankment after a theatre or some function that had bored him, and the sight of the poverty-stricken waifs and strays haunted him; and then, more than ever, he shrank from the Carlton. He resented especially the gobblers and guzzlers in the softly shaded restaurant, clattering their knives and forks and clinking their glasses, when they would have been better off in their beds with

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the windows open and the breath of heaven coming in to purify their fatuous souls and suggest some meaning to life.

Some meaning to life? Unconsciously he was looking for it, and felt it near him, yet hidden by an undergrowth and overgrowth. "Money has a great deal to answer for," he said to himself one day, half cynically; and gradually this idea took hold of him. But it was the manner in which other people used it that surprised him; with his own he dealt as a thing of no particular interest. He spent or gave easily, and without much consideration, and worried himself not at all. It never occurred to him to measure the result, till a long interview with his bankers took him by surprise and left him puzzled but not anxious, on the contrary, rather amused.

It was Lant who found the house in Princes Gate—the day before he sailed for Australia. Wendern refused to consider it; he was tired of London, and wanted to go to a desert.

"But the offices of the Bangor Estates Syndicate are in Great St. Helen's, not in a desert, and you are the Managing Director," Lant responded blandly. "In a year or two, when many fortunes have been made, you can go where you please. Meanwhile, I'm afraid you must occasionally be on the spot."

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"I hate the accursed rows of houses in London," Wendern answered. "I hanker for a tent in the middle of a green space."

"My dear chap, I know what you mean, and the house that I have seen is exactly what you want. You will look on the Park from the front windows; at the back there is a large and enclosed garden reserved for the benefit of the tenants. The people in the other houses are usually occupied in ministering or preparing to minister to their vanities, so you will have the green space you long for to yourself. The house is admirably furnished: the amiable couple who did it have just been divorced, and you can buy the whole thing cheaply. The servants you can take on. The stabling is excellent, a garage has been added—in fact, everything is there. And London is at your feet; take my advice, don't kick it away even with the softest slipper. You can entertain or not, as you please, at Princes Gate, and the address will sound admirable to the discriminating members of the Syndicate; and it will prove that you are a resident and not a bird of passage. I'm not sure that it's well to stay too long at hotels—especially at hotels of a particular sort. Next time I come to London I shall take a house for the season. I am always afraid of being called a speculator."

"But you are one," Wendern said absently.

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“Oh no, dear chappie, that’s unfair. I am a benefactor discovering the unknown portions of the earth and insisting that they shall yield their produce, or develop their possibilities, for the benefit of men. It sounds almost scriptural, doesn’t it? I frequently read the Scriptures—a fine work, full of picturesque passages: some of them would look so well on a prospectus.”

“You are a humorous blasphemer.”

“Not at all, sonnie, not at all.” Lant’s tone was almost affectionate; for no matter what his faults might be, he had a liking for Wendern, and he knew, and had even a respect for, the qualities that went to the making of his character.

“Talking of speculators, did you ever notice that the big birds, vultures let us call them, and the big fishes, sharks, let us say, make it their business to stay at one of five hotels in London? When they are there, you may conclude that they deal in millions; if you nibble at the bait, you know that the stakes are worth considering. This is why, next time I come, I shall avoid those luxurious haunts. If I stay at any hotel it will be one of the quieter places!—some haunt of the county magnates, the well-dowered spinsters, and dowagers whose husbands knew that generosity is a supreme virtue in the eyes of women.”

“Now and then it has crossed my mind that

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you are a scoundrel, Lant." Wendern's voice prevented his words from being offensive.

"So unkind of you." The manner was still soft and pleasant. "By the way, is it true that there is to be a lawsuit about the Derryford Docks?"

"I heard something about it."

"It will interest you to the extent of a good many thousands—if you allow it to come to one?"

"Yes; and I shall, if it is necessary. They have behaved scandalously."

"Still, I would overlook it if possible. In a lawsuit both sides usually get the worst of it; it would be a pity if the thousands fell into the gap between." Lant had a righteous horror of all legal proceedings: he thought they proved that one of the parties concerned had shown a lamentable lack of the art of propitiation, and the other of an equitable temper.

"It wouldn't matter," Wendern said with a shrug. "There are things one has to do; the cost is counted later."

CHAPTER III

FOR nearly two years Wendern lived at Princes Gate quietly and apparently content. He saw few and fewer people; he appeared to be thinking out some problem that gradually presented itself out of the mists and silences that gathered round him. Beyond them a sense of developments sometimes dreamily haunted him, but he was neither curious nor impatient; they would come as surely as the soft-footed days of the years he had to live, and he was content to wait.

The Bangor Estates Syndicate provided him with a certain amount of excitement. The statutory meeting at the end of the first year being highly satisfactory, and the accounts from Lant extravagantly good, the shareholders were reckless and exhilarated. Then there had been a somewhat sudden drop, a gradual reaction, a sense of things not going so well, which annoyed him; but he shook off his vexation, all things had their ebb and flow, he thought; it was the inevitable law. The ebb seemed to prolong itself, there was no violent slump, but a gradual slackening; and the time came when uneasiness rather than annoyance oppressed him. Threatenings, too, of an unpleasant sort seemed to be in the air.

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The developments began when he least suspected it, and in more than one direction. Lord Derbyshire, a fair-haired young man, a bit of a fool, but harmless, whom Lant had used freely for Syndicate purposes, dropped in one morning.

"I say, I want you to come and dine at Claridge's to-morrow," he said. "I have persuaded my uncle, old Lord Kenton, you know, to let me give a party there—awful lark; he'll pay the bill and all that. He is getting old and afraid of mortifying before his son gets married—son doesn't want to marry. He's the only son, and uncle Kentie thinks he ought. Told him I'd invite that American girl, Katherine Fiffer,—ever hear of her?"

Wendern shook his head.

"Awfully nice girl, carries her head as if she thought a lot of it; she and her mother are staying at the Ritz, they talk of settling in London; got money to spend, cartloads of it. Uncle Kentie thinks it ought to be kept in the country, some one ought to marry her; he's too old to do it himself, and Malcolm—son, you know—doesn't like women, prefers motors, lives in a garage. Rather think he wants me to take her on, but I don't expect she'd rise to that."

"Probably there won't be much difficulty in finding some one else."

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“Daresay not. Loads of cash, you know.”

“I’m beginning to see,” Wendern said slowly, “that there’s just one great power left in England, and every one is trying to grab it.”

“What is it? Might give me the tip.”

“Money.”

“Awful bore not having it.”

“It has never troubled me much.”

“Wait till it’s gone, then it will. Seems to make itself into a sort of ghost you can’t lay hold of, comes and worries you last thing at night and in the small hours of the morning; tells you you’ve been an ass, and has a nasty nagging way. You see, money isn’t any good unless you spend it, and when you do, you haven’t got it any longer.” The fatuous face looked anxious.

The poor chap couldn’t help being an idiot, Wendern thought. “I didn’t know you were worried about this sort of thing,” he said; “the right use of money will be the world’s next problem.”

“Daresay; but problems are an awful nuisance. One sort worries you when you’re at school, another sort puts you in the divorce court—think it’s best to keep clear of them myself. Wonder what you’ll say to Miss Fiffer?”

“Are you in love with her?”

“No. She’s a fine girl, of course, but I like ‘em.

George Wendern

more lively—the sort you see on the stage; there's an awfully fetching one at the Prince's; I happen to know her a little."

"Does that mean a good deal?"

"It would if I could raise some cash—if that Syndicate of Lant's would jump up now. It doesn't matter what else you've got, if you haven't ready money it's the deuce. I wish you would put me in the way of a thousand or two."

Wendern shook his head. "Not to go that journey. Look here, you're a big land-owner: I have been thinking that there must be work cut out for all of us—"

"Oh, I say, if you're going to think again, I'm off—thinking is just about the worst thing you can do if you want to enjoy yourself, assure you it is, and if you don't enjoy yourself, what's the good of anything? Besides, my lot—the land I mean—is pretty rotten. Everything on it nearly lying full length because it can't stand up any longer, and not another mortgagee will even look round it."

At ten minutes past eight the next evening Wendern stood in a group that had gathered for the dinner-party in one of the larger rooms at Claridge's. He turned his head towards the door as Katherine Fiffer entered. She was slim and tall, brown-haired, grey-eyed and dreamy-looking;

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her mouth was grave and sweet, yet almost roguish when she smiled, and she carried herself like a princess in a fairy tale. He seldom noticed women, or rather he always noticed them, and forgot them an hour after they had vanished; but her face haunted him from the first moment; she drew him to her, held him and filled his life, not insistently so much as unceasingly, standing out in his thoughts as the one woman in the world. He bent forward a little as if he had been waiting when she passed him after shaking hands with her host, then drew back, remembering they had never spoken, for, though he was dreamily wonderstruck at meeting her, he had no sense of their being strangers. He felt as if a curtain had been drawn aside, a misty veil lifted, and in the moment before it dropped again whole distances seemed to spread out behind and before him; a hundred different thoughts chased themselves vaguely through his brain; and the sum of it all was that he had seen the woman he would love, who would be his wife; and the future was no longer a mystery to him: only the precise manner in which it would shape itself, and whether its freight was joy or sorrow, was hidden.

“I think she’s just about the most rippin’ girl I ever met—I mean, for a girl who isn’t lively,” Derbyshire said to him later.

George Wendern

“She’s not a girl, she’s a woman.” Wendern seemed to be speaking to himself rather than to his companion.

“Oh, I say”—Derbyshire looked almost disconcerted, for to him girlhood was everything, “I shouldn’t think she was more than four-and-twenty; that isn’t too far on, is it?”

“Too far on? Age isn’t counted by years: there are children who are women and have never been young; and women who are children, and will carry youth about with them as long as they live.”

“Awfully lucky for them, you know; wonder what the dodge is?”

“It’s doing or thinking that turns mere consciousness into living, and lights up the years or darkens them. I’ve been learning that lesson during the last year.”

“Thinking is all nonsense, I’ve told you that already, it only worries you.”

“It’s the root in the ground.”

“I get along all right without it, do just what comes into my head; flowers that bloom in the spring haven’t much root but they’ve a gay time.” Derbyshire felt that he was being witty.

“And the other way uses you up. The worst of it is that things come hurrying after you sometimes, and won’t be shunted.”

Gave a Party

Derbyshire was puzzled again. "I never know whether you are talking rot or awfully good stuff," he said.

"Neither do I," there was a smile in Wendern's eye. "I say what I feel, and let the rest settle itself."

He sat next to Mrs. Fiffer at dinner. A somewhat sharp-eyed woman with a thin face, a kindly smile, quick and eager, who looked as if she remembered many vicissitudes in life and had fought them bravely. As a matter of fact, she was a little uneasy with her wealth and not altogether at home in her finery; but she went on, interested and determined to grapple with the new difficulties just as she had done with the old, bringing the same qualities to bear upon them. She told Wendern that she was a widow, with only Katherine, and no relations to look after them. They meant to settle down in England for a few months; perhaps altogether; she didn't know yet. It depended a good deal on whether they could find a house that would do; anyway she thought English people were quite charming, and they were so kind. Now, where would he advise her to look for a house?

"You can have mine, I'm tired of it."

"Why, how long have you had it?"

"Two years."

George Wendern

“Don’t you like it?”

“I never thought as to whether I did or didn’t, but I wasn’t made for houses. They usually have rooms with four walls and ceilings roofing them in——”

“Why?”—she looked up at him in wonder; there was a far-off look in his eyes that made her think of wide spaces and the great simplicities among which the early years of her life had been spent,—“you can’t have houses without rooms?”

“And then I don’t know what to do with the servants.”

“Well, with us,” said Mrs. Fiffer—she spoke with a strong American accent—“they’re just the biggest handful we’ve got, and I’m told they’re a worry over here too. How is it?”

“There’s nothing the matter with them fundamentally, but I never know where they are or what to say to them, and I get tired of looking at furniture.”

“Now, that’s a funny thing to say. I expect your things are lovely?”

“There’s nothing the matter with the things, except that they’re there; nor with the house itself, except that I don’t know what to do with it. It is always standing in the same place, you see.”

“Who lives with you?”

“No one.”

Gave a Party

“Never been married?”

He shook his head.

“Well, I’d get some relations round me.”

“I haven’t any.”

“Then why in the world did you take a big house in Princes Gate?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I should beat my head against the walls of a small one. I’m used to prairies—but there are none in England, and too many people in London.”

She was quite pleased. “That’s just what I feel about New York, Mr. Wendern. It’s all over people, and the way they hustle, why you’d think every one of them was going to die in about eighteen months’ time, and had to hurry all he could into the bit of life that’s left.”

Then, with what seemed like a little gust of affection for her country, she added, “But it keeps a sky over their heads all the time, so that they can see their way about, and a blue one too, even in winter, when the wind is sticking knives into you round Flatiron Corner.”

After dinner she told Katherine of her conversation with Wendern. “He ought to hear what you think of England,” she said as he went up to them. They were standing near the doorway, watching some arrivals at the belated evening party that was to follow the feast. Mrs. Fiffer liked looking

George Wendern

at them and thinking that they were second best to herself, who had been thought worthy to sit at the table; they were only given the crumbs from it in the shape of odds and ends collected on a buffet.

“England?” the girl said. “I think it’s like no other place in the world, that God tried His ‘prentice hand on it when He wanted to make heaven.”

“That’s an idea,” he said slowly. “But America was discovered a good deal later,” he added with a whimsical smile, “and the ‘prentice doesn’t do the best work.”

“I love its little green fields and its fenced-in gardens and beautiful ways. Best of all,” she went on as if she had not heard him, “I think I love its old country-houses and the legends they’ve got about them. Why, Mr. Wendern, England is hundreds of romances and living pictures—doesn’t that strike you?”

“I never looked at it from that point of view.”

“I love its age so, and all the places that are falling to pieces—did you never realise the music there is in the word medieval?”

“I don’t think I ever did.”

“Well, probably you never had occasion to use it in your country any more than they had in mine, so didn’t worry about it; but I’ve always longed

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to see what it meant; it conjures up visions of knights in armour, and battlements, and stained-glass windows, and swords put in patterns on walls, clanging gates and drawbridges, and beautiful ladies riding forth on—didn't they call them palfreys?—and troubadours and Saxons and Danes——”

“You've been reading poetry, Miss Fiffer—‘Saxon and Norman and Dane are we’——”

“It's Tennyson, of course,” the joy in her smile chased the dreamy expression away—“there's another English thing—poetry, England is full of it; the poetry that is just the voice of its traditions speaking down whole centuries. Hundreds of years hence I suppose we shall have our traditions; we are doing our best, we are making them, and our literature and poetry, but they will be different, for the picturesque age is over in England too, and we shall never have the ruins of one as she has. That's why we love her so—for what she has been even more than for what she is; just as she loves Greece and Rome; they had their turn first. It's wonderful how things are dealt out all round—but some are not picturesque.”

“They were, before any country had its turn, or traditions were invented.”

“But it's the traditions that make England so wonderful,” she persisted, “they haunt me—I love them.”

George Wendern

"I expect she didn't remember she was making a quotation at first," Mrs. Fiffer said, by way of an apology, when Katherine had crossed to the other side of the room. "You see she's not college reared, as most American girls are now. I don't hold with the plan myself, and would never let her go. She's had to find herself as I did; but she's had more books to do it with, and seen more, ten times more, than I'd done at her age, and what she's not got in knowledge, Mr. Wendern, she's got in high spirit—she knows how she wants to live and what she wants to have and do. I'm so struck with her sometimes—but I sit and say nothing, and wonder what it'll all come to."

"She's beautiful," Wendern said, surprised at this sudden burst of confidence. He moved forward a chair; she took it gratefully.

"Well, I'm glad you think that—I think it myself, but mothers are often just foolish. Anyway, they seem to be taking to her over here, and the way people send invitations—" She turned to listen to the wiles of a dowager who had eligible sons and had heard that the American woman was rich.

"That's a handsome girl," Sir Charles Pierce said to Wendern as they stood together watching the room.

"She looks as if Nature still held her unadulterated; and she walks as if she remembered the backwoods—"

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“Not much backwoods about her,” Sir Charles answered. “I should call it New York or Chicago—out of which her father collected a few million dollars which were put to her account when he went to the next world.”

“That’s against her——”

The other man covered his density with, “The mother’s rather a corker, isn’t she?”

“Not bad; she looks as if she’d been used to simpler things than she has now—it’s to her credit that she doesn’t forget them.” He went back to her presently. He liked the freshness of her, the suggestion that the wiles of New York and London had surprised but not overwhelmed her. “I’ve been wondering,” he said, “whether, if you are free, it would be possible to persuade you and Miss Fiffer to lunch with me to-morrow at Princes Gate?”

“Why, I’d be delighted, but I think Lord Derbyshire said he was coming to us, and I wouldn’t like to throw him over, for he’s doing his very best to make us enjoy this country.”

“I’ll ask him, too, if you like?”

“Well now that is kind, and then we would see the inside of your house. You said we might take it off you; but I wouldn’t like to drive you away.”

“There’s one to let round the corner, that is to say at right angles to mine—virtually a few doors off——”

George Wendern Gave a Party

“We’d be neighbours.”

“If I stayed——”

“You’d have to stay if we came.”

He looked across at Katherine. “I will,” he answered.

The next morning, the day the Fifers were coming to luncheon, he realised, as he often had done lately, that household matters bored him. “I must get some one to look after them,” he thought; “it’s a woman’s work to consider what one will eat and what flowers shall be put on the table.” He took up the “Times” and his eye caught an advertisement, “‘A young widow, thirty-two’—Humph, rather young, perhaps she’s older—women always lie about their ages—‘wishes to find a post as lady-housekeeper to a gentleman of position’—well, I don’t know about the position, but it might be as well to see what her views are.” He sat down and wrote to her.

CHAPTER IV

MRS. BERWICK was sorely perplexed; she knew as little about Wendern, after four months, as she had done in the first week, except for the fact, gradually grasped, that money was not forthcoming from him. He never seemed to think about it. The attributes of wealth were about her, but actual money she never saw. She knew there were many unpaid bills, that even tax-gatherers were sent empty away, and the rent of the house was accumulating; yet though he never for a moment struck her as being an adventurer, nor dishonourable, Wendern was quite unconcerned. Sometimes a shade of anxiety seemed to pass over him, but that was all. He was kind and considerate to those about him; he had always a reserved and detached sympathy for pain or trouble brought to his notice; but there seemed to be an impalpable fence round him that kept would-be intruders at a mental distance.

"If I could get hold of that Mr. Parker," she thought again one morning a week after Mrs. Rigg's visit, "why I might know something." She pushed aside the tradesmen's books and the little

George Wendern

white china slate she had made ready for the cook, and putting her elbows on the table, rested her chin in her hands while she tried to solve the riddle of the situation. But it was useless, only going up and down a *cul-de-sac*. "There is nothing to do but wait," she told herself. "It is wonderful how many things smooth themselves out just by waiting—still I, for one, simply must have some money soon."

Rogers entered. She looked up irritably: these incidents of the morning were getting on her nerves. "Oh, what is it?"

"A man has come with a waggon-load of orange-trees, ma'am. Mr. Wendern ordered them yesterday for the conservatory and balconies."

"Good heavens!" She was thrown off her guard, a dazed smile spread over her face. "A waggon-load of orange-trees——"

"He was told most of them were to go in the dining-room."

"Have them put there. I'll come and look at them presently." In the dining-room were two wide windows with a glass door between that opened, as the French window in the morning-room did, on to the little private garden, and out to the lawn beyond. A cleverly managed mass of greenery had given that end of the dining-room the appearance of a conservatory, almost of a

Gave a Party

wood. It made the light soft and gave the room a curious air of charm and isolation. The house had been reconstructed inside by a previous tenant, and was the only one that had the whole width at the back so arranged that it opened on to the garden.

Rogers went on: "And Mr. Joe Parker is here."

She gave a gasp of relief. How lucky that he should come now while Wendern was out of the way. "Oh, ask him to come in; I hope you haven't kept him waiting in the hall?"

"He's brushing himself down—he says he's a bit dusty."

A moment later "the backwoodsman" appeared. His face lighted up at seeing her; he pulled himself together with an air of remembering that he had just brushed his coat; a smart little woman, he had called her to himself on his last visit, he was glad to see her again and alone, "though it makes one a bit nervous," he thought.

"Good morning, marm; I hope I see you quite well?"

She looked up eager and anxious. "How do you do? I am so glad to see you," then added discreetly, as became a lady-housekeeper, "Mr. Wendern will be here directly; he has been expecting you, I know."

"You don't mean to say he isn't down yet?"

George Wendern

"Oh yes, of course he's down; he generally rides before breakfast. Now, I think, he is in the garden," she went halfway to the window and looked out.

He caught the cut of her dress sideways, she had a neat little figure, he thought. "Well, I'm not in a hurry, delighted meanwhile to have your company."

"I fear you had so little time with your friend the other day." She went back to her place by the table and began her quest, but she felt that it had to be done with discretion.

"Not much, marm, not much; get more now perhaps."

"Oh, do sit down," he was still standing, "he is certain to be here directly. How strange it must be for you two from a great country to meet in this little island?"

Mr. Parker looked at the chair, shook it, and cautiously seated himself. "Not unpleasant, marm, I can assure you. And if England is little, why it does its best to make up for it."

"Yes?"

"It owns several pretty considerable bits of land in various parts," he explained.

"But out there in Melbourne—it is beyond Melbourne, is it not?—you must feel so different, so free, such makers of the world."

Gave a Party

"I don't know that we make anything. Frozen cattle, canned goods, and wool are the main products. Now and then a gold mine turns up; we wish it did a little oftener, and that it wasn't just a pocket, as it often is, and soon emptied."

"Do tell me about Mr. Wendern's estate? It is enormous, is it not?"

"Well——"

"What does it chiefly produce?"

"Wendern's? Well, he could tell you that better than I." There was amusement in his voice, he gave an inward wink with his off eye. "The little woman's trying to draw me," he thought; "I don't think she'll get much to go on with." But he rather liked her for it; quick wit appealed to him, especially in her sex. "You see, as a rule, a man is usually most interested in his own stock."

"And are you a millionaire too?" Her voice was full of inquiring innocence.

"A millionaire too," he chuckled, "no, marm, I'm not. I represent wool and a failure. A good deal of Australia did that at one time, lately it's picked up a bit. This last year or two I have been in South Africa, or I should be poorer than I am; but I came to England round by Melbourne for all that. Now tell me about Wendern, do all the women fall in love with him over here too?"

"Yes, indeed. I don't wonder," she gave a

George Wendern

little sigh; "you Australians are terribly fascinating."

"Well, so are you English women." He got up and looked towards the window. "Who are those people walking about there? Isn't that his garden?"

Mrs. Berwick explained that the lawn beyond the little fence was for the use of the tenants in general.

"There's a smart-looking girl, there on the right, walking about with a woman in blue, her mother perhaps. Why, he's with them—" he started forward, then checked himself. "Know who they are, marm?"

Mrs. Berwick tried to hide her impatience, "Mrs. Fiffer and her daughter—the great American heiress."

"A well-built girl and walks as if she knew how. I expect she's in love with him?"

"I don't know, Mr. Parker,—perhaps she is."

"Well, I expect he isn't in love with her. Some men run after women, and some men are run after. George was always run after."

"I don't wonder."

"He's a good chap, Mrs. Berwick, and not afraid of anything, God, man, or devil; would look on at the burning of his own soul, or the elopement of his wife with a nigger, without turning a

Gave a Party

hair. Done himself a few bad turns and never flinched, done lots of people good turns and forgotten them the next minute. He and I have known each other these twenty years and been the better for it. Here he comes—with the women tacked on to him."

Wendern sauntered towards the window with his companions, he hurried into the room when he saw Parker.

"Joe!" he exclaimed, and grasped his hand, "this is good." The two men looked at each other for a moment, then Wendern turned to Mrs. Berwick. "Mrs. Fiffer and her daughter have come to wish you good-morning."

They had stood outside as if waiting to be invited to enter. Mrs. Fiffer, matronly, good-natured, and, as usual, conscious of her expensive clothes; Katherine, slender and grave, in a white dress, hatless, with a red parasol shading her from the sun.

"Oh, dear Mrs. Fiffer, do come in; how nice to see you," Mrs. Berwick purred.

"Sure you don't object to early visitors?"

"Oh no, I like them."

"Well, it proves that you have genuine health and a real complexion." Mrs. Fiffer spoke with conviction.

"I hope I have." Mrs. Berwick put on her

George Wendern

bewildered look; she had tried it before the glass several times. "And I love the morning, it is so fresh, so full of Nature. How do you do, dear Miss Fiffer? What a beautiful parasol."

Joe Parker standing aside said to himself, "She knows the game uncommonly well."

"Is it?" Katherine answered. "I love red."

"But it's the colour of tragedy, of dreadful battles," Mrs. Berwick sighed.

"I didn't think of that—for I haven't met any tragedy yet, or been far off enough to come upon battles."

"And yet you Americans are always travelling."

"Well, you've such a lovely country to live in here, I don't wonder you stay at home," Katherine's face lighted up, and when she smiled it was beautiful. "We've been talking to Mr. Wendern. There is such a good floor in his drawing-room we think he ought to give a dance."

"You must persuade him,—he'll do anything for you."

Wendern, standing near, added in a low tone, "If I'm persuaded," then louder, "but I must introduce my friend Joe Parker to you."

Joe Parker, remembering again the brushing of his coat in the hall, made his best bow, "From Australia, marm, and glad to make your acquaintance."

Gave a Party

“Well,” said Mrs. Fiffer, when Katherine had shaken hands and turned to Wendern, with whom she moved slowly a little aside, “it seems to me that all of us here know a good deal about long distances.”

“You’re from America, marm, I take it—from New York?”

“You’re right, Mr. Parker. J. B. Fiffer, my late husband, was pretty well known there.”

Joe Parker considered a moment before he answered. “He was. I remember him twenty-five years ago when I went to his office downtown before he moved it up to Fifth Avenue, and had a talk with him. I heard a good deal about him later, and I consider myself in luck meeting you here to-day.”

“Now, isn’t that nice of you,” she beamed, and forgot her daughter in the quick talk with the Australian, till suddenly she turned to her and asked, “What’s he saying about the dance?”

“We have not discussed it yet,” Katherine answered with a little start, and went on to Wendern, “We shall be at Kenton House to-night. I suppose you will, too?”

“I didn’t mean to go; I will if——”

“And to-morrow we are going to Brighton.”

Mrs. Fiffer heard the last words and went over to them. “Friends of ours—the Lough-Johnsons,

George Wendern

don't know if you've heard of them, Mr. Wendern?—are at the Norfolk Hotel and want us to go down to them for a week, but I'll be back sooner. Katherine will stay over Sunday; she wants to go to Rottingdean and see the house Burne-Jones lived in—and Kipling, wasn't he there? It's wonderful how girls care for people who are talked about; their mothers remember the world long before all these writing people and picture painters were in it, and it got along very well."

"It did," said Parker, "and I believe that we could get on without most things they do. George and I remember thousands of miles with nothing on them but what sun and wind and rain put there. As for books and pictures, and all you think so much about over here, we never set eyes on them and we did well enough."

"It wouldn't do to let them hear you say it, Mr. Parker," Mrs. Fiffer answered triumphantly, "but there are lots of things here we're not any better for; however, we've got to have them, so it's no good making a fuss."

It was strange how these people to whom modern conditions had given so much harked back to the more primitive ones in which they had been born.

"Mr. Wendern," she went on turning to him, "Mrs. Lough-Johnson is coming to stay with us

Gave a Party

the week after next—I would like you to meet her; she's one of my oldest friends."

"I shall be delighted, and should have been equally so if she had been one of your youngest."

"Isn't that like a man," she beamed; "they're all for the young ones. And now, Katherine, I think we'd better be going in; Lord Derbyshire said he would be at our house by twelve o'clock. He's a delightful young man," she informed Parker.

"It must be delightful to him to be thought one," Wendern said.

"And he finds reasons to take him to our house pretty often." Mrs. Fiffer put significance into her voice.

"I've no doubt."

Katherine moved uneasily. "He's very English," she said.

"Very—and a good fellow," Wendern was speaking again. "May I walk back with you?" He threw a smile at his friend.

"You may go, George," the backwoodsman said with a comprehending nod.

"If Mr. Parker doesn't mind being alone a few minutes I should so like to walk back with Mrs. Fiffer," Mrs. Berwick chimed in adroitly. "She promised to tell me about the Woolwich ball." She put her arm through the elder woman's and

George Wendern

walked on, cooing as they went. "Soldiers are such dear brave creatures, fickle and badly-off, and, oh! so fascinating!"—"Parker heard her say; he smiled broadly as the voices died away.

"You didn't tell me you were going to Brighton?" Wendern said to Katherine as they crossed the lawn.

"We were talking of other things. I don't want to go one bit."

"Then why do you?"

They stood by the little gate that went into the Fiffer garden. "I don't know, I have to—" She stopped and looked up at a sycamore-tree that shaded them. "There are things one has to do, just to store one's memory; it would be a desert if one didn't."

"When are you coming back?"

"On Tuesday or Wednesday." She hesitated again before she added, "Lord Derbyshire is going to motor down one day."

"You seem to have adopted that young man."

"He is worried about his property. I believe it is often a worry in England. Old houses are very beautiful, but they fall to bits and need a great deal of money to keep them up."

"I daresay." The subject didn't interest him; he was thinking of something else. "Shall I

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come down too?—not the same day as Derbyshire,” he added. “We might go over to Rotting-dean together?”

Mrs. Fiffer, standing on her own threshold with Mrs. Berwick, beckoned.

“Why, yes,—but mother is waiting, I must go in,” Katherine answered. Something in her manner, almost an embarrassment, made him ask—

“Don’t you want me to come to Brighton?”

“Yes, yes, I want you to come. I’d love it.” She said the last words softly and held out her hand. “We could talk there, we can’t in London; there’s too much traffic, too many noises and people. We might be able to get away from it all for a little while—in the car, if you brought it.”

“I will.”

She gave him a happy nod and turned toward the house; then looked back over her shoulder and said, “Think you might come to Kenton House to-night. I know you are asked; but if you don’t want—why, there’s an end of it.”

“I will. I do want to come.” The light was in his eyes as he turned away.

CHAPTER V

IT was there when he went back to the morning-room. "You must forgive my bad manners," he said, and put his hand on Parker's shoulder, "we always air them to our old friends."

"Quite right. I like them best, but they give one away. Tell you what, George, that's a 'cute little woman.'"

"Who—which?"

"Why, Mrs. Berwick. The way she fastened on to the mother while you walked off with the girl was worth coming to see."

"It was. She may have less virtue; I've nothing to do with that one way or the other, but she has more tact than any woman I've met with for some time; and take it altogether, tact is the better possession; it lasts longer and often goes further, but—" The door opened. "Oh,—here's Lord Derbyshire."

Parker, unused to titles, looked up quickly, and a shade of surprise passed over his face. He had a respect for physique, and it struck him that if this were all rank and pedigree could give in the way of looks they were not up to much.

Gave a Party

"How do, Wendern?" Derbyshire seemed disappointed at finding the room empty.

"How do you do? This is my friend, Joe Parker."

Parker had risen, evidently expecting "to be formally introduced, and was making his best bow. "Good morning, sir, I'm from Australia, and glad to see you."

"I say—thank you." Derbyshire was overcome by the bow. "Australia's an awfully fine country, I'm told."

"It is, and there's plenty of it; in fact, it can't be beat for size." Parker looked at him again, and seemed to be waiting for something to justify the title and probable position of the little fair man before him.

"Well, it has more room to stretch itself out in. You see, the Channel gets itself rather in the way over here," was the profound remark.

"I suppose you've never been over to us, sir?" Parker wondered if he ought to say "my lord," but decided quickly and obstinately that he wasn't going to do it to this whippersnapper.

"No. Never been farther than Monte Carlo, that sort of thing—good hotels, cook well, and time always in a hurry, so that it's gone before you know where you are—rather a good thing, I suppose; get bored if it didn't. Awful bore getting bored,

George Wendern

you know." Having disposed of Parker, Derbyshire turned to Wendern. "I've been round the corner; they told me Mrs. and Miss Fiffer were here."

"They've just gone back."

"Well, if you don't mind, I'll go too. I've got a bull pup for Miss Fiffer, and should like to see it gets fair play with her Persian kitten." He nodded to the two men. "I expect you're precious glad to get out of Australia," was his parting tactful remark to Parker. The front door banged after him.

"Why didn't you let him go across by the window, George?" Parker asked.

"There was no occasion."

"Miss Fiffer's a fine girl."

"Yes." Wendern's eyes turned towards the house in which she lived.

"A great heiress, isn't she?"

"Thirty thousand a year, or more." There was regret in the voice.

"Well, it would be useful."

"It's the girl I want, not her dollars."

"Got enough of your own left to match them?"

"No; but if she cares, it won't matter whether I'm rich or poor."

"It usually matters a good deal."

Wendern chafed a little, but tried not to show it.

Gave a Party

“I’m learning to hate the stress laid on money—the importance given to it. It is overrated, till the whole world seems to turn on hands and feet of metal,” he said.

“Most people like it—especially women.”

“I know. And if I have it and she wants it, it will add to my happiness to give it her. If I haven’t, she can fall back on her own; so it needn’t worry me.”

“You seem to be pretty sure of her.”

“It is amazing if she cares; but I should insult her if I didn’t think it. And I shall be done for if—” He said it almost to himself.

“George, you’ve taken it badly this time.”

“I’ve taken it badly.” Wendern changed the subject. “Let’s talk of home. How did the old place look when you saw it last?”

“That’s some time ago; but it looked the same as ever.”

“Which means, as if Heaven had annexed it.”

“I wonder what made you sell it?”

“I wanted to be free, to wander about the world without the worry of possessions. But I’m longing to go back again; it’s the soil from which I grew, the sky which drew me up. I kept Sandway Strip,” he added suddenly.

“The worst bit of all.”

“I know; but a little shanty stood on it once

George Wendern

in which my father and mother lived their first years of struggle, when they were young and strong, the whole world to each other,—and often couldn't see four meals ahead. I sit and think of it sometimes till I'm so homesick I could walk to it.” He got up and crossed the room. “I shall have to go back; that will be the end of it. I'm out of place in this country.”

“Well, I feel that about myself—already,” Parker answered slowly. “It takes a long time to get used to the ways they have over here, if you haven't been born to them.” Then, after a pause, “Do you remember a queer-looking chap called Longarm Jack?”

“Yes.”

“When I got back to Melbourne six months ago, he came along and asked me if I thought you'd sell that bit.”

“I know,—he wrote to me; he wants to put up a cabin while he looks after Bender's claim, which is next to it. He won't get it; nothing shall be built on it, unless it's a home for me and mine.”

“I shouldn't think that likely.”

“I don't know; perhaps some day it will happen. I'm tired of every crowded place under the sun and of all they do in cities.” Wendern seemed to be lost in a dream for a moment, but he always spoke freely with Joe Parker. “I think some-

Gave a Party

times that God's vengeance on Adam has been civilisation," he went on; "it's a curse, and men will go piling it up till they lie flattened out beneath it. It doesn't suit me; I hunger for the old life, the prairies, the blue sky, the stillness and work—and the roughness. They prate about the simple life here, they should try it there; they would feel themselves back at the starting-point. Let's talk of something else;" he held out his cigarette-case.

"No, thank you, not my size. By the way, George, when I was in Melbourne I heard you talked of a good deal in connection with the Bangor Estates Syndicate. They didn't think much of it over there."

Wendern looked up almost anxiously. Then answered as if a thought had reassured him, "Yes."

"I understand you're Managing Director here?"

"Yes, but it's Lant's deal. He went about in London among the fashionable fools; any one can do it if he's supposed to be rich. He introduced them to the Syndicate."

Parker gave a grunt. "And, with your name tacked on as well, the shares were pretty freely taken up?"

"That's so. But I'm the biggest shareholder after Lant."

"How is it going?"

George Wendern

"At first the accounts were magnificent; then they ceased altogether. Lately things have been rather difficult. Six weeks ago Lant cabled that he was on his way to England. He was at Naples last week; he'll be in Paris next."

Parker gave another grunt.

"I always believed in Lant," Wendern said, and added reluctantly, "Some people didn't."

"He's reputed to be worth four millions."

"Luck for him." There was a long pause; then Wendern looked up again. "I wish I hadn't played the fool, Joe; I should like the money to be on my side, and not on hers."

"But you have a fortune in the Derryford Docks."

"Locked up in a lawsuit—two hundred thousand pounds. Everything I have is locked up, for I have twenty-five thousand somewhere else, and that can't move till the Dock business is settled."

"But, man, you don't seem to know that the Dock case is coming on next week."

"Coming on next week?" He was roused now.

"Didn't they cable? Don't you read your Australian papers?"

"I haven't opened them." He had been dreaming of Katherine all the last few weeks, of nothing else.

"But the London papers have had telegrams—

Gave a Party

it's a big case, George. I was at the Agent-General's yesterday—he was full of it."

"I have been mad and thinking about other things; but I'll cable out inquiries at once. I imagined it wouldn't come on for another month at least. If it goes right all will be well." He was silent for a minute, his whole expression altered, "You've opened up a vista, Joe, for it's bound to go right. Life and the woman I love are coming into line—I feel as if I saw the masts of a ship."

"Glad I spoke. Here's Mrs. Berwick again," as the trim figure appeared at the window.

"Oh, but I'm interrupting you, I know I am," she said with soft self-reproach.

"It's all right, Mrs.—Mrs. Berwick," Parker hesitated over her name, but he looked at her with a deep-cut smile on his weathered face,—"I'm about going."

She went half-way across the room, meaning to leave them together, then stopped as if by a sudden idea. "I don't think you've seen the house yet, Mr. Parker; I should so like to show it you. The drawing-room is quite beautiful,—that's why Miss Fiffer wants Mr. Wendern to give a dance. And there are some orange-trees that came this morning, they would make you think of Australia—do oranges grow there? I'm so ignorant, I don't know a bit."

A gleam of amusement came into Wendern's

George Wendern

eyes; this was a new view of his lady-housekeeper. "Go and look at them, Joe," he said. "Mrs. Berwick will show them to you."

Parker consulted a big gold watch—it slipped easily out of a pocket that was evidently much bigger. "Well, let's say ten minutes for the orange-trees. I'll see you again in a day or two, George. If I'm in the city perhaps I'll look you up at the office."

"Do."

"Won't you come, too, Mr. Wendern?" Mrs. Berwick asked as she lingered by the door.

"No, thank you. If you'll let me I'll write a note at your table."

"She's an uncommonly 'cute little woman,'" Parker thought, amending his former verdict as he followed her out—"just the sort to have with you if you want to go farther."

Rogers had evidently been watching for his moment; he found it when Mrs. Berwick and Parker stood talking by the orange-trees. He went softly into the morning-room and up to the writing-table, "Beg pardon, sir, but can I speak to you?"

Wendern looked up; he was writing on a cable form. "I believe you're doing so already."

"My mother's telegraphed, sir, fell and broke her left leg."

Gave a Party

“That’s bad. Worse if she’d broken the right one too,”—the voice was sympathetic but abstracted.

“And turned seventy-three, sir.”

“A good age, Rogers.”

“I wondered if you’d mind my going to her for a couple of nights?”

“Of course you must go to her.”

“Thank you, sir.” Rogers hesitated, “It’s rather an expensive journey to Reading, if you don’t mind my saying so. There’s the doctor, and perhaps she’ll need a few things.”

Wendern felt absently for his pocket-book and opened it. “She’ll need a good many things, here are two five-pound notes.”

“Thank you, sir; is it my wages? They are due——”

“Wages? No,—a little present.”

Rogers tried not to show his surprise. “Oh!” he gasped, “I’ve been awfully upset—God bless you for your kindness.”

A little smile came over Wendern’s face. “I hope He will, Rogers—but I don’t expect He’ll do much for a tenner,” he added, when the man had left the room with well-tempered elation.

Mrs. Berwick returned a few minutes later.

“Well, what did Joe think of the house?”

“Oh, he loved it,” she said, “but we only went to the conservatory, and then he had to go.”

George Wendern

"Ah, he regretted it very much, I'm sure." He finished the note he was writing and rose as if to go out.

She arrested him with a little movement, and spoke in a cooing, apologetic voice,—"Mr. Wendern, the servants want their wages: it's ridiculous of them, I know, but they do. Could you find time to write a cheque?"

He stood by the fireplace, unruffled and still preoccupied. "Why do they want their wages? Rogers is going to his mother for a day or two, and would only spend his if he had them."

"But that class is so absurd, it generally expects to be paid once a-month."

The statement appeared to interest him. "Probably that's why it's so unthrifty," he answered. "Money paid in small sums is generally frittered away."

"But, dear Mr. Wendern, people will insist on having it sometimes,—tiresome trades-people, for instance; they are sadly democratic nowadays and want everything." She took up the household books from the writing-table. "I have some accounts here of yours, and—and—one or two of my own I should so like to pay." She had found courage to speak at last, but her hand trembled.

He seemed rather amused. "My dear lady, I have too high an opinion of you to suppose that you mean to corrupt your creditors by giving them

Gave a Party

the use of your money.” He said it as if to dismiss the subject.

She put down the books with a gesture of dismay.

“How do you like the orange-trees?” he asked.

“They are lovely.”

“By the way, there is a picture sale at Christie’s to-morrow. I must see if I can pick up an old master or two to send home,”—he always spoke of Australia as home,—“one ought to make some return to a place that is so hospitable as to let you be born in it.”

“How thoughtful you are.”

He smiled at her absently. He was thinking of other things already.

He went to Kenton House that night, but only for half an hour,—he had outgrown that sort of entertainment, he told himself; as a matter of fact, he had never liked it. The host was old and deaf and very rich, a widower with an only son; he had been persuaded by a relation, an enterprising widow with daughters to marry, to give a ball. She received the guests for him at the top of the crowded staircase; behind her were drawing-rooms full of people talking at the top of their voices, beyond them the band and, beyond again, in a long gallery, the dancers. He

George Wendern

searched in vain for Katherine, and found her at last in one of the most crowded rooms. It had a view of the stairs, through a doorway on one side. She seemed to be watching for some one while she talked; Wendern wondered if it were for him. Lord Kenton was beside her; his shrivelled face, with the carefully brushed and dyed hair above it, was bent towards her, as if he were deaf but trying to gather what she said. Gradually Wendern managed to get near her. She held out her hand, but her manner implied that she did not wish to be interrupted. A man he knew slightly caught his eye, and he talked with him just to make time. In a few minutes Lord Kenton left her, evidently with reluctance; but he had other guests who demanded his attention; Derbyshire, hovering by, adroitly took his place, and as if for a reason they had already discussed, he and she slowly made their way together towards a picture, beneath a special light, and a group standing near it at the far end of the gallery. Lord Kenton went up to them, and presently Katherine disappeared with him.

Wendern looked at the crowd about him again; the faces were worn, the smiles on them seemed spurious, the expressions strained or anxious, the jewels theatrical, but he had never appreciated diamonds; an acre of unspoiled land with the blue

Gave a Party

sky above it was worth more to him than all the gems in existence. "This place suggests a first-class compartment bound for Hell," he said to himself. "It's a queer thing that people who believe themselves possessed of souls should deliberately come to it." He went on through the suite of rooms towards the gallery; the band was playing a waltz, the air there seemed full of gaiety, the dancers were young. It was better, but he remembered the dim ways of the park, the wide stretches of grass, the long deserted roadways with the trees, Nature's sentinels, beside them, and the stars glinting between the leaves of the branches that reached above the pathway he liked best.

In a few minutes he was in a taxi hurrying to it.

"She will come through," he said as he breathed in the stillness, "she is on her way, though at present she finds the strange crew amusing." He had no doubt; for did he not remember the long twilights of the past weeks, of the soft June evenings? They had met without any preconcerted signal at the gate of the little enclosure that was marked off to the Fiffer house, or sat on a trimly painted seat near by. All the good green space was deserted at that hour, as Lant had foretold it would be. The fashionable people of the houses round, tired out with their dissipations, were resting or making ready for the amusements

George Wendern Gave a Party

of the night, and the shadows had half hidden their dwellings. Those little intervals snatched from the restless world near them had seemed almost an enchantment to Wendern. The stillness, the softness, the finding a sanctuary there in the heart of London was so strange, and the sky of deepening grey, the little wandering wind, warm and caressing it had been, had served for a setting to his dreams. He had seen her eyes; shy and questioning and tender, yet with something in them that petitioned him not to speak too soon, not to break the spell of those wonderful moments that followed the good days they were living, moments that seemed to be as none other in the world had been, and to linger between the greyness and the dark as if time were loth to end them. Once he had held her hand longer than usual when they parted. "Good-night, George Wendern," she had said—the first time she had called him so—and she lingered a moment as if to hear again his whispered "Katherine" before she abruptly turned away.

CHAPTER VI

WENDERN'S private room at the office of the Bangor Estates Syndicate in Great St. Helen's, James Dawson there alone, busy sorting letters. There was one with the Naples post-mark. "From Mr. Christopher Lant; we shall hear something about this old Syndicate at last," he said to himself, and his spirits rose. He was a spare man of nearly forty, with a worried expression, devoted to Wendern, but sceptical as to the Australian manager, though it was Lant who had known him first and suggested that the Syndicate would be an excellent home for a saved-up £200. Concerning his modest speculation he had no anxiety; for, with Wendern as English manager, he felt convinced that whatever happened his money would be safe. But there was one shareholder who was sorely on his mind. "Something will have to be done about father-in-law Teesdale," he said to himself, "or life won't be worth living. If I'd known what he was like before I married Polly, I'd have thought twice about it." He looked up at the map of the Bangor territory

George Wendern

hanging over the fireplace. A railway, designed to run down to the coast, was marked out; but nothing had been heard of it lately.

He turned his head with a jerk and listened; some one was coming upstairs. Without knock or hesitation the door was opened and a heavy ill-tempered-looking man of fifty entered.

“Yes, sir?” Dawson had assumed a brisk business-like air.

“Who are you?” the newcomer asked in a bullying tone.

“Mr. Wendern’s chief clerk, sir.”

“And where is he? And what about this precious Syndicate?”

“About it?”

“Is it a swindle?”

“Swindle? Really, sir—” Dawson was overcome with astonishment.

“Perhaps you’ll answer my question.”

“Mr. Wendern is not here; but you may rest assured—”

“I may rest assured, I suppose, that I’ve lost my five hundred? I mean to see him before I leave.” He sat down and the chair creaked. “It isn’t the money I mind, but I’ve never made a mistake in my life, and I’m not going to begin.”

“My father-in-law has put in the same amount—”

Gave a Party

“What’s that to me?”

“Well, I shouldn’t have let him do it if I didn’t believe in the Syndicate myself, sir. It’s all he has in the world.”

“Probably he’ll lose it, and serve him right. Fools and their money are soon parted, it knows better than to stay with them; nothing like money for keeping prudent company in the long run.”

“But he’ll be ruined if he loses it.”

“He oughtn’t to have risked it.”

“You risked yours, sir.”

“Because I’ve plenty to get it back with if necessary. A man who has only £500 ought to put it into a Building Society, and take care that it’s a good one before he does, or a Savings Bank, while he sets to and earns more to go with it. Perhaps you are in this deal yourself?”

“I’ve invested my own money in it, of course,” Dawson was severe but imperturbable. “I think I hear the chief’s step—here he is, sir; he will answer your inquiries himself.”

Wendern, leisurely as ever, entered. He looked at the visitor with interest but without surprise.

“Good morning, Dawson,” he said, then turned to the big man, who had risen. “Mr. ——?”

“Digby, that’s my name, I came to talk to you about this Syndicate.”

“I shall be delighted to talk to you, my dear

George Wendern

sir, but this is my private office, to which I have not invited you, so I must ask you to wait while I open my letters. Will you try these?" he held out his cigarette case.

"No, thank you," Digby grunted—a different sort of grunt from Parker's—and made his impatience evident.

Wendern turned to the letters, read two or three, and threw them on one side. There was a cable, he had not noticed it at first, he tore it open quickly, "The Derryford Dock case comes on next Monday," he said to Dawson, "and is expected to last several days."

"Is that anything to do with us?" the visitor asked.

"Nothing at all to do with you, but it is highly important to me."

Digby's temper was giving out. "I want to talk to you about this Syndicate, and my time's as precious as yours," he said. "I'm not satisfied with what I've heard; and a good many aren't; we get reports that we look upon as bluff—do you hear, sir—bluff?"

"Most certainly I hear," Wendern was still unruffled; he pulled another letter from its envelope; it was type-written, and had several signatures. "Perhaps this will interest you, Mr.—Mr. Digby?" He read aloud—

Gave a Party

DEAR SIR,—We, the undersigned, not being satisfied with our position on the Bangor Estates Syndicate, nor with the rumours concerning its prospects which are circulated in the City, propose calling upon you at your office next Wednesday morning, the 15th inst., at 11.30.

JOHN F. WELCH.
WILLIAM SHAW.
THOMAS HACKETT.
ROBERT BENNETT.
ISAAC LAZURUS.
WILLIAM DOBSON.
CYRIL GRAHAM (Rev.).

“Six men and a parson—I wonder who put the parson into it.”

“I knew this was coming. They think about it as I do,” Digby blustered.

“Well, suppose you join them on Wednesday morning, the 15th, at 11.30, my dear sir,—one—two—” he counted the names again, “seven, that would make eight? Perhaps Mr. Lant may be here by then.”

“I think there’s a letter from him this morning, sir.” Dawson held out the one with the Naples postmark; it had been passed over.

“Ah,” Wendern said as he read it, “he is at Naples, and will be here in a few days—in time for the deputation, probably, on the 15th. Until then, you might think over the questions you wish to ask? I’m sure you will understand that I prefer to see you all at the same time.” He held open the door.

George Wendern

Digby was evidently at a loss what to do. "Very well," he muttered, after a moment's consideration, "matters will have to come to a head then—as you will see, both of you." He lumbered downstairs.

Wendern went back to his letters. Presently he pushed a heap of them towards Dawson. "I want you to answer these, the same thing to them all: 'Mr. Lant is expected in London immediately, when a meeting will be held and the position explained to the shareholders.' Luckily, they're not all included in the deputation."

"Yes, sir." Dawson hesitated; evidently something was perplexing him.

Wendern saw it, and asked, "What is it?"

"There's my father-in-law, Mr. Teesdale, sir; he put five hundred pounds into the Syndicate——"

"Well?"

"He's obliged to pay something up, and the fact is he wants to take it out."

"He must wait till Mr. Lant comes. I daresay he will let him withdraw it."

Dawson hesitated; he was respectful but almost vehement when he spoke. "Couldn't you let him have it, sir? It isn't much to you, but it's everything in the world to him. If you would let him have it, why, it would be a kindness I

Gave a Party

should never forget. It isn't that I don't believe in the Syndicate myself—my own money is in it, as you know,—but he gets into such a state of mind. He was off his head once for a little while, and this five hundred pounds is upsetting all the peace of my home. My wife is his daughter; naturally he goes on at her, and the fact is I daren't go back this afternoon, sir, unless I can tell him it's safe."

"Safe! You shall have it; give me the cheque-book. After all, a bank is only an abstraction, but an old man and a father-in-law is different."

A boy entered. "Mr. Joe Parker's here, sir."

"Ask him to wait five minutes while I write a note." He sat down and wrote to the bank manager—

I shall be greatly obliged if you will honour another cheque. I have drawn one for £500 in favour of Mr. James Dawson. The lawsuit, in which I have a large sum of money involved, will be decided next week, and I may mention that Mr. Christopher Lant will be in London immediately with a full account of the Bangor Estates Syndicate.

"Send this round at once," he said to Dawson, "and show Mr. Parker up in three minutes."

"Yes, sir. I can never thank you enough; you have taken a load of worry off my mind."

Wendern nodded for answer; he had no words at his command. Before Parker came up he wanted to think, to be alone, to face things.

George Wendern

Money! He had never understood the meaning of it before—the power of it, the misery, the pleasure it had in its gift. And still he had only a glimmering of it, for he looked upon the Syndicate worry as just a queer and temporary development of things, a diversion of time and the devil's, designed to harry him and produce a depression he was a fool not to shake off—for it was bound to come right, and he would be all the better for seeing Joe Parker. He touched the bell by his side; a dead weight seemed to be laid upon him, even to reach out his hand was an effort.

Parker strode in, strong and sinewy, brusque and kindly. A vision of blue sky and wide spaces went swiftly through Wendern's brain, as it had done through Mrs. Fiffer's at the Claridge dinner a few months ago. "God made them," he thought, "but He gave the devil some plots, and he built on them."

"Why, George, what's up, you seem a bit anxious?"

"It's nothing."

The backwoodsman looked at him sharply. "Well, if you've got five minutes, I'd like to sit down."

"Do,—but wait while I write out a telegram; I must send one to Lant."

"I should tell him to hurry here if I were you."

Gave a Party

Wendern reached down a yellow form from a hook by the table. "I'm doing so; he's still in Naples."

"He'd be better in London."

"He'll be here next week, and there'll be a meeting of this confounded Syndicate. Meanwhile a deputation of the shareholders is to worry me on Wednesday. I hope he'll come for it; that's why I'm sending him a wire."

He wrote it out and a couple of letters, while his friend looked awkwardly through 'The Times,' as if it were a strange paper in which he did not know his way about.

"Now then, Joe?" when the letters and telegram had been despatched.

"I came to see you about two things, George. Partly about this Syndicate, partly on my own account."

"Good. Tell me your own part first?"

"Well," Parker smoothed down the knees of his trousers, "there's Mrs. Berwick."

Wendern looked up amused. "Yes, there's Mrs. Berwick. You saw her, for the third time, I believe, yesterday."

"We—well, the fact is, we had a talk among those orange-trees the other day, and the result was a little dinner together last night—at the Carlton."

George Wendern

"Did you? I was strolling over Wimbledon Common, looking at the sky. How did you manage to find your way to the Carlton?"

"She put me on to it—she's 'cute,'" Parker added approvingly, "seems to know everything."

"Oh yes, she's 'cute. How did you get on?"

"First-rate. She's a nice woman. Do you know much about her?"

"No, but I agree—she's a nice woman."

"Know anything about her people?"

"Nothing. Not my business."

"I wonder what sort of age she is?"

"I never speculate about a woman's age. She looks—well, thirty-four, except when she's made up, then she looks forty—but what does it matter, if you like her? It's her future that concerns you, not her past." There was a pause. Then, trying to keep amusement out of his voice, he asked, "Are you thinking of matrimony, Joe?"

Joe shook his head in a doubtful manner, evidently he had not quite made up his mind. "Well, I don't know. She's clever and knows what she wants; one might do worse than take her farther, though I'm not sure that I've got enough to take her very far. I should think she'd expect her full fare paid."

"You may lay your bottom dollar on that. But she isn't a bad sort."

Gave a Party

“The thing is that I’ve never hung on to a woman yet.”

“Then begin. Women are bankers of most of the virtues, and when we are good for anything it’s generally because, without knowing it, we’ve drawn upon them. This sounds rather like sentiment from cheap melodrama,” Wendern said, wrinkling his forehead, “but it’s true all the same.”

“Well, what I’ve always heard about a woman is, that you may care for her, give her things, do anything you like with her, except trust her. That’s awkward.”

“Don’t believe it, Joe, doubting the thing you love isn’t good enough. What else did you want to tell me?”

Parker answered reluctantly. “There’s this Syndicate. They say rather queer things about it in the City.”

“What do they say?”

“Why, that Lant came over to negotiate it, and said Bangor’s price was fifty thousand——”

“That’s right. Lant found it himself.”

“—But that Bangor was a figurehead; Lant got the estates for nothing, and they’re worth nothing. What did you put in?”

“Twenty thousand. The other members of the Syndicate found £50,000 which, except for enough held back for office expenses here, was sent

George Wendern

out there—" he stopped, then went on uneasily, "I don't believe these stories; the thing is sound enough. Lant has his head screwed on the right way, and he's all right at bottom."

"You've a good opinion of human nature, always had."

"Human nature is all right; it may get a little smudged with the blacks of a city, or misshapen with the knocks of the world, but it comes out all right in the end if you know how to treat it. That's another sentence fit for melodrama, Joe, if you have any friend in that way of business."

"Well, you may say what you like, but you're feeling a bit uncomfortable."

"It's only the worst side of me trying to give a whisper to the other."

Joe considered a moment.

"What time is that deputation coming on Wednesday?"

"Half-past eleven."

"I'll make it my business to look in an hour later and hear how it's gone off." Parker got up to go.

A letter was brought in. Wendern opened it absently while he answered "Do"—he looked up with an almost startled expression on his face.

"Hullo, anything the matter?"

"Yes, this is rather a worry," he read the letter again. "Dawson's father-in-law put five hundred

Gave a Party

pounds into the Syndicate; all he had, apparently. Lant's accounts were so highly coloured in the beginning that people would have put their souls in it if they'd had the chance. The father-in-law has got into a funk lately, and made the fuss relations usually do if you have a finger in their dealings—so I am told, I never had any myself. It ended just now in my giving a cheque for the five hundred pounds. I sent a note to the bank asking them to honour it, but the scoundrels refuse; there's a pretty overdraft there, of course. What the deuce am I to do if it comes back dishonoured? I hope Dawson hasn't sent it in, I made it payable to him." He pushed the button of the electric bell. "Where is Mr. Dawson?" he asked the boy who answered it.

"Downstairs, sir."

Wendern gave a sigh of relief.

"I want him."

"He needn't come yet," Parker put in, "tell him five minutes' time." He turned to Wendern when the boy had gone, "I can manage it, George."

"You?"

"Five hundred won't break me, and will tide you over the difficulty. Where do you bank? I'll go and pay it in at once."

"No, old man, that won't do. Suppose things go wrong with the Dock case, it will break me ab-

George Wendern

solutely—for a time at any rate. It's no good pretending it wouldn't. I've played the fool completely."

"I don't think it's possible it can go against you, from what I hear; but even if it does, five hundred pounds won't break me. I'll go at once." He got up, then hesitated. "What about Miss Fiffer?"

Wendern wrinkled his forehead again. "She is at Brighton—and I haven't spoken to her yet."

"Well, you'd better—and make things right."

"With my face against these complications?"

"You said the other day that money didn't matter."

"It doesn't—if she cares. I don't want her dollars—I am getting afraid of money, Joe. I should like to take her away to the other end of the world with all we own on our backs."

"Don't think that would please her."

"No, it wouldn't—and this is only a temporary hole." Wendern's tone changed, he shook his head and was himself again. "Lant will be here to see the deputation through, and the Syndicate's all right, I expect. When the Dock case is settled there will be £200,000 let loose; and there's plenty more scattered about in various directions. I must gather up the loose ends, that's all."

"Well, don't make yourself uneasy meanwhile,

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I've a little loose cash, if it's any use to you. By the way, you'd better telephone to that bank and say I'm coming."

"I will."

Parker waited till the message had gone through before he spoke again, "You'll be mum about Mrs. Berwick," he said sheepishly; "don't let her know I've said anything?"

A laugh looked out of Wendern's eyes as he answered—

"Wild tigers would not get a word from me."

He rang for Dawson when Parker had gone, "I shall not be here again to-day," he said, "I am going—but I want an analysis of the shareholders made."

"Yes, sir," Dawson answered from mere habit, "but I don't quite understand."

"I want to know who and what they are and whether they can afford to speculate."

"Very difficult to tell that, sir, from a list. There are some lords on it, I should think they were all right, three or four parsons and a lot of widows."

"Parsons and widows oughtn't to be allowed the control of their money, they always make fools of themselves."

"I hope not, sir, in this instance. And there's my little bit, though I don't like mentioning it?"

Wendern gave him a reassuring nod. "I'll take

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care of that, Dawson, come what will. You've got your father-in-law off your mind."

"Oh yes, I have. You can't think what your wife's relations are, sir, if you have to do with their money."

Outside Wendern took a taxi. "Open it," he said. "Now drive to Richmond Park."

The man looked at him doubtfully. "Seems all right," he thought, "don't want any one from an asylum, or a bloke blowing his brains out inside my cab, I can tell him."

Lying face downwards on the grass in one of the forgotten by-ways Wendern felt as if he could see through the earth, deeper and deeper, to the other side of the world, to the great solitudes and the high mountains, the wastes of water and the wide prairies that he loved. "If I were only away from all this accursed nonsense," he told himself, "this meddling with money, this worshipping of it, she and I in the world alone—if she would go," he added with a touch of cynicism. "Money—money," he shuddered as he thought of it, "it's the great test perhaps; there's some solution of its mystery, some quenching of its power, some antidote for the curse it is, its possession or its loss, hidden somewhere, and not dreamt of yet—in the cities perhaps, if men could only find it. But it is not socialism, nor any sort of robbery disguised

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as legislation—there's an easier, simpler one waiting. Meanwhile it must be treated according to the rules, I suppose, and the rules have been made by men, honest or dishonest, as if they were at the mercy of a toss-up.”

CHAPTER VII

THREE days later Mrs. Fiffer wrote to Wenden from Brighton announcing that they had left the hotel. Their friends, the Lough-Johnsons, had taken a house at the far end, facing the sea at Hove.

"We want you to come down right away and see us," she said, "I told you about Mrs. Lough-Johnson. She is a real nice woman and most anxious to make your acquaintance. I'll get back to town this next Monday morning, though Katherine will stay on, and I'd like you to come before I go; not this week-end, for we are full up, but if you could motor over to-morrow early or next day it would fit in very well. And as there's a full moon and the road couldn't be better, it won't matter if you're late going home, for we hope you'll stay to dinner, and Katherine says I'm to tell you she wants you to take us to Rottingdean; she hasn't been yet, because she's waiting for you."

The last words decided him, he whizzed there the next afternoon, to find himself in a house crowded with furniture and full of strange people; the Lough-Johnsons apparently had a habit of collecting them.

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“I’m real glad to see you,” Mrs. Fiffer said, “I’ve got to go to Rottingdean whether I like it or not, but I want to do it in your motor, for Albert Lough-Johnson—he’s that young man by the tall girl in grey, he married her last fall, and this is part of their honeymoon—has a fancy to drive their car himself; and what he likes is a road at the edge of a cliff and a speed that is something between a flash of lightning and a whirlwind. I couldn’t help thinking yesterday that at any moment we might go over, and though no doubt the bottom of the ocean is interesting, we wouldn’t be in a condition when we arrived there to see what it was like.”

At first his visit was a disappointment. Katherine seemed to be interested in the rest of the party and to group him in with it, but that was all. The afternoon light was glaring, they waited for it to soften, tea was brought in and prolonged. A woman—she was forty-five, straight-haired and muscular, who came to call, stayed for it. The Lough-Johnsons had apparently picked her up at the hotel, and were rather bored now at her advances. She had been round the world, and insisted on cackling about it, chiefly to Wendern; perhaps she had heard he was rich, or knew that the Fiffers were, or it seemed a good opportunity to show her originality. She displayed it by ask-

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ing, with a patronising air, questions concerned with the luxury of travel, and announcing that she herself always booked as a steerage passenger.

“Now I expect Miss Fiffer would sooner die,” she said, “yet I did it from choice. It is a great deal to be hardy, and one degenerates with too many luxuries.”

“They make life agreeable,” Katherine answered. “But it isn’t doing without them that I should mind—”

“Think you would, Katherine,” put in Mrs. Fiffer.

“In the steerage, yes, mother; because people of the sort who go by it often seem to care so little for the things that cost nothing. I could be happy without the luxuries, without anything almost, on a wide plain or in a dense forest a thousand miles away.”

“Well, I don’t know, but I think you wouldn’t.” Mrs. Fiffer shook her head doubtfully, while Wendern, feeling as if Katherine had held out a hand to him, looked towards the window: on the far horizon, faintly, mistily, he imagined a ship.

At last, in the early summer evening, an expedition was made up and they started—two motor loads. Mrs. Fiffer, in an enormous black hat fastened on with a blue veil, her body shapeless in a wrap; Katherine, grave and slim, in a long white

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coat, a yachting cap, and a white gauze scarf tied under her chin; Wendern and his chauffeur. These four were in the second car, the first was filled by the Lough-Johnson party.

Wendern was impatient at the whole programme. He had imagined himself and Katherine flying along the King's Road alone, and far away from it; Mrs. Fiffer was a worthy person, but he felt her presence to be an intrusion, and the Lough-Johnson car, though it was well ahead, an impertinence. It was not till they had left Brighton and Kemp Town behind and were skimming over the Sussex Downs, with the sea on their right and great stretches of blue sky overhead, that he managed to pull himself together.

She leant towards him then. "Isn't it good to be alive when there's a sea like that beside one?" she asked dreamily, as if in her thoughts she traversed it.

"It's always good," he answered.

She nodded agreement and quoted, to herself it seemed rather than to him, the famous bit from 'Lavengro,' "There's night and day, brother, both sweet things. Sun and moon and stars. . . . There's likewise the wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, who would wish to die?"

He noticed that she left out the repetition of the word "brother." What molehills are mountains to lovers; he felt that the omission counted one

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to him—a mountain with the sunshine on it. “Would it be sweet under any conditions?” he asked, thinking of the travel-woman’s talk just before they started.

And again she nodded. “Under any,” and she quoted, “‘there’s the wind on the heath—brother.’” He turned away.

They came to the dip, Rottingdean was in sight; they whirled round the white house at the corner and slowed down into the village, that seemed to be hushing itself to sleep already, before the sun had done its setting.

“Rottingdean!” he heard Katherine whisper to herself.

They looked up at the outsides of the houses in which its great men had lived, the green they had so often crossed, the graves in which some of them lay sleeping, the church with the little old box, that the Romans had made, against the wall, and at the beautiful Burne-Jones windows.

“The men who have made this place famous were poor once,” Katherine said. “Wasn’t it lovely for them to be born in the work-world with health and capacity? All the chances were with them at the outset, and they took them.”

“But that’s what your father did too, Katherine,” Mrs. Fifer said. “He made all he left; it was lucky for you he did.”

“Why, yes, mother, he was splendid.” She

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added, in a whisper again, "But we wear our rue with a difference."

"That's another quotation," Mrs. Fiffer explained to Wendern with pride and an apologetic air. "Katherine's always making them. I can't think how she remembers, but I don't know that they're any good. I think one ought to be able to say what one means without them. There are just as many words as there always were to go on with."

They were looking back at the church, and hardly heard her. Katherine's face was almost sad as she touched her mother's hand, she was always tender to her. "Let us go," she said. A hush seemed to have fallen upon them as they set their faces homewards, perhaps because they knew a little more, than when they had started, that was worth remembering.

The other motor, the one with the Lough-Johnsons, was already on its way.

Along the white road and over the undulating downs towards Brighton, Wendern was inwardly fuming. There was only dinner to come. It would be more or less of a party. Soon afterwards he would have to begin his journey back in the car. The visit was a failure. "But I'm beginning to realise," he thought, "that life's a failure as far as I am concerned. The right things seem to range

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themselves round me, but I don't know how to deal with them. The whole world was before me, and I didn't choose the right place to live in; I had money, and didn't know the right way to use it; the woman I love seems to be eluding me. Probably I'm a fool, and it serves me right."

They had reached the high white road of Kemp Town. The soft grey veils of twilight were dropping over land and sea. Katherine seemed lost in a dream. He leant towards her. "Does it ever strike you that the men who build cities are criminals, and the people who live in them are maniacs or fools?" he asked. "The savages and the beasts in the jungle know better."

"Well, you know, Mr. Wendern, they must be very uncomfortable. I don't think a jungle would suit any of us," Mrs. Fiffer answered. "I'd rather be as we are."

"Mother," Katherine said with a start, "you ought to go in quickly and rest before dinner. But I should like to get out and walk. It isn't too far?" she looked at Wendern.

"No." His heart bounded as he spoke to the chauffeur.

In a minute they were alone; the motor scurried on; it was a speck in the distance before they spoke. Then they stopped, and leaning over the wall on their left, looked down at the sea and far

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away to the haze and the ships passing between. "I was afraid we weren't going to get any time at all together," he said. "Those friends of yours are excellent people, but they have a way that makes one feel like part of a chorus."

"And we have hardly met since the other morning," she answered. "You went away from Kenton House so early."

"I thought you were trying to avoid me."

"Why should I do that?"

"Anyway, you talked to Lord Kenton most of the time I was there. I didn't quite see where that aged gentleman's merit came in."

"He is Lord Derbyshire's cousin, and I was observing him."

"It wasn't the first time you'd seen him?"

"No, but I hadn't thought about him before. He gave that dinner at Claridge's, where we first met; but I don't believe I even looked at him then. That's why I wanted to talk to him. It was so interesting seeing him in his own house. We don't have marquises in our country."

"Personally, I have never wanted them."

"Well, I'd like to know about this one, anyway."

"There isn't much to know. I heard yesterday that he was going to marry again because his only son refuses to marry at all—prefers motor racing to matrimony."

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“He’s very rich, isn’t he?”

“He has a hundred thousand a-year, and never did a day’s work in his life or spent his money with any intelligence that has been noticed.”

“But don’t you think the aristocracy ought to be rich? It’s such a fine institution.”

“I hadn’t thought about it from that point of view, though I gathered the other day that you had. I don’t quite see how you get at the fineness.”

“Why, it means men with deep roots in the ground, right down through hundreds of years.”

“It did at one time. They’re pulling them up now and throwing them on the rubbish-heap.”

“If they had an aristocracy—a real one, I mean—in America, not the new sort they are making over here, they’d be very proud of it.”

“They’ll get it in time; they are longing for it. In the long run, though a man may not get his desire a people does; it’s the great adjustment for individual disappointments.”

“I don’t think I understand?”

“It doesn’t matter. Let’s talk of ourselves, a man and woman generally arrive at that when they’re together. I’m glad you were only studying Kenton as a curiosity and not to avoid me.”

“I never avoid a friend.”

“I don’t want you to call me that.”

“Is it too much?”

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“It’s not enough; friendship is generally as fatal to what I want as twilight to a rainbow.”

“Perhaps you want the impossible,” she said, half in fear it sounded. “We all do. Ibsen knew that, and showed us what came of it, don’t you remember?”

“I want—” his voice was husky.

“Don’t tell me,” she interrupted, while a little of the aloofness that had been in her manner lately was perceptible. Then, half-unconsciously, she put out her hand.

He took it, and for a moment she did not draw it away. “You know what I want to say,” he went on, “but for some inscrutable reason of your own you won’t let me speak.”

“I am thinking so much.”

He lifted his cap and the soft winds from the sea swept over his head. She looked up at him, and a smile came to her lips. He could see it plainly; there was a little spice of tender mischief in it—the smile of a woman who was with the man she loved.

“Do you know what’s happening to you, George Wendern?” she asked.

“What?”

“You are getting grey.”

“Do you mind it?”

“I like it.”

“Like it?”

George Wendern

“Why, yes—grey hair and wrinkles, when they’re not on an old man, say so much.”

“What do they say?”

“That you’ve lived—you’ve felt and you’ve used the world. I love to see it,” the last words were said in a whisper, almost down into the wall over which she bent; but he heard them, and made a little movement as if his arm were going round her. She drew back quickly, her manner changed, a low laugh, half-weary, half-frightened, came from her.

“Let us talk about the dance you are going to give; your drawing-room will be just lovely for it.” She was making time; but it was not for him to see it.

“Why don’t you and your mother give one?”

“We shouldn’t do it well—two women never do things well.”

“Neither do two men—it takes a man and a woman; to them all things are possible. Do you understand?” he drew a little closer.

“Why, yes. But I don’t want to understand anything to-day, only just to take in what a good place this world is when you’ve not lived in it too long, or allowed yourself to feel too much——”

“Too much?”

“It’s a mistake to let yourself do that, Mr. Wendern. Don’t you think so?”

He chafed at the “Mr. Wendern.” His voice

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was impatient as he answered, "Usually it means being blindfolded and running a race to heaven or hell—you don't know which till you arrive, for your ticket has been taken by the other person concerned—" he stopped, but she made no sign, "you have taken mine, you know it."

"I don't know, I won't let myself know anything to-day." She looked out towards the misty distance again as if she were trying to question it, to divine what lay behind.

"My dear," he could hardly hold back the other words that rushed to his lips, "you are troubled?"

"Oh no, not troubled, only wondering—" she stopped as if afraid of saying too much.

"Only wondering? I *know*. Katherine, my dear, let me speak."

"You must wait," she answered desperately, "I don't want you to—to say things. You mustn't. I feel as if the Fates or the Immensities, or whatever people who talk that way call them, have taken hold of me. I must find out what they mean to do."

"You are talking nonsense, but I love you—" he held her to him, she seemed unable to resist. The darkness gathered closer, it wrapped them, the road was deserted, there was hardly a sound save for the sea whispering up to them.

"Oh, you mustn't say it—" His face was against

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hers but she averted her lips,—then suddenly for a moment, a long wonderful moment, she gave them to him and drew back half shuddering.

He was triumphant now, he felt certain of her, “Why not?” he asked.

“You mustn’t, till I’ve thought it all out, till I know myself—that is what I want to do,” she said passionately, but with a strange determination. “I must think it all out alone. The great things of life have to be thought out alone, quite alone,” her voice trembled, her hands went to her eyes as if to force back the tears; but the next moment she looked at him with the light shining in them. The determination was still in her voice, but she seemed to be forcing it. “Mother’s going back to London before I do. When I come I shall know myself. But listen, whatever way it is, I want you to believe that I’ve tried to look at things right;—in the big way, not just the selfish way.”

“Beloved, what are you thinking, what is in your heart—can’t you tell me?” he tried to hold her again, but she held him back.

“It’s so difficult,” she answered, “I expect Americans often get hardly judged, anyway they get misunderstood. English people can’t even guess what their country is to them, the raising of ideals, the helping to give it new forms of life,

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the longing to get for it what other countries prize most.”

“What has all this to do with us?”

“You’ll see—you’ll understand when we talk it all out together.”

“Let us do it now.”

“No. It can’t be done, George”—she said his name softly, it was like a caress. “I’ve got to think first, you must give me time for that. You’ll know when you see me again. Life will be marked out for us both then.”

“Life together,” he said, “it must be that—if it’s to be any good to me.”

“It isn’t only good to oneself of which we must think, there are others one has to do for,”—she lifted her head and shook it as if to change the subject, “Let us talk of the dance.”

“Dance,” he said impatiently, “you might as well ask a king to play at feather-blowing on the day he first enters into his kingdom—or is going out of it.”

“Well, anyway,” she answered with a change of tone, “it’s time we went back. They will be wondering what we are doing. Let us go.” They turned away and walked towards Brighton in silence; she seemed to be lost in thought, almost to forget him.

“When do you come back?” he asked.

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She gave a little start. "Next week. I think on Wednesday——"

It was the day of the deputation; but that would be over in the morning, he reflected. "It's nearly a week off, may I come down again?"

"No." She held out her hand for a moment. "Don't come," she almost entreated, "I must be alone, or away from you, at any rate for this one week—then I shall know what I can do—or must do."

He looked at her puzzled. "Must do?"

"Must do," she repeated with a catch in her breath. "Say you won't come, you won't do anything."

He gave a little nod in acquiescence. "But I could motor down when you are ready and fetch you?"

She considered a minute. "You shall have a message, but you mustn't come unless I tell you." She went a step forward, then with a sudden change of mood looked back over her shoulder and laughed a little. "We must hurry," she said, "or we shall be late for dinner, and the Lough-Johnsons will look hungry. They do, you should just see them."

They went on to the balcony for a minute before he left, and looked down at the motor snorting by the curb.

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“George Wendern,” she said, “all dinner time you seemed to be thinking very hard—what was it about?”

His voice was low and very tender; she sighed as if she thrilled to it; “I heard you say again ‘a thousand miles away’—would you go?”

She waited a moment before she answered, “I only said it because I didn’t like that woman. I love this England and all its traditions.”

“Traditions again,” he said.

“Yes; I have told you before how they fascinate me and England’s oldness—its beauty. I don’t want to leave it. I wish I had been born here and belonged to it. It’s wonderful to me that English people should ever try to imitate us over there, or any people in the world.”

“You want to live here always?”

She spoke softly, so that they might not hear her in the over-lighted drawing-room behind. “I don’t know,” she seemed afraid of her own words, “and I don’t want to go on with this talk; it’s time for you to go, George Wendern; we’ve had this good day—I want to be left alone to think of it.”

He flew along the white road; there was a moon, as Mrs. Fiffer had remembered there would be. The way was very still; the breath of the summer night was sweet and warm, it brought back the

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touch of her lips a few hours ago, when they had stood looking over the wall and down at the twilight sea.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR the next two or three days Wendern was chiefly occupied with the Derryford Dock case, a heavy mail, endless cables, consultations with lawyers, and the fact that for the first time he was face to face with the necessity for money. The lawsuit was expected to last some days, but the result he had no reason to doubt. In the natural course too, other things were bound to be adjusted, for he had many resources, though, by a crisis, of the sort that overtakes most people now and then, they had congested. The personal inconvenience and the household matters were too trivial to worry him; but the Syndicate did, for against his will he was haunted by a sense that Lant, whom he had known long and trusted, was something worse than a speculator with a dash that passed for courage, or genius, and occasionally carried all before it. Joe Parker's attitude towards Lant added to his uneasiness; he resented it, for Wendern was loyal to his friends, but he knew that Parker was clear-sighted, with a shrewd knowledge of men.

“If Lant’s an intentional scoundrel,” he thought, “there’s no honour left for honest men

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to deal with; and it's not to be filched from among thieves." He shrank from remembering any generous deeds of his own; he had always carelessly maintained there was no merit in doing a right thing, nor even a kind one (if he himself were the doer), when not to do it "would be more or less damnable." But he remembered a time, years ago, when he had cleared Lant's name from an unjust suspicion, and Lant's voice saying, "You have proved me an honest man, George, and may the devil stand by me in the hour I die if I am not one—or ever cease to be one." Lant's sister, a girl who had found life too hard to do with, was lying dead in the shanty she had made into a home; he had stood looking down at her white face while he spoke. The next day the two men carried her to a lonely grave in the clearing. "She cared more for me than any one else ever did in this world," Lant said, "and she went out of it, blessing you for what you'd done to me."

"You must let me follow it up," Wendern answered, and this had been the root of Lant's prosperity.

They had not met for years, not till Wendern came to London a stranger, curious careless un-practical and dreamy, seeking even then some meaning of a problem he had not yet recognised to be one. Lant had changed, not for the better;

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but he was obviously rich, popular, and in the swim of things. The rest was a matter of drifting. "A man who dropped full-fledged from the clouds, promptly forgot his origin, and enjoyed the snares of the world," Lant once said of him, and it was noticed that he was always at his best with him. His amusements soon palled on Wendern, but it was a long time before even a vague suspicion of Lant occurred to him, and then it was promptly dismissed; some things were too impossible he thought, for he remembered the walk back to the shanty from the grave that nothing but two sticks had ever marked. "Besides, Truth *"gets the upper hand occasionally, even among liars,"* he added, not that he had taken Lant to be one—as yet.

Parker looked in two mornings after Wendern's visit to Brighton. His manner was embarrassed, he hesitated, and seemed to have something up his sleeve; once he pulled out a telegram, looked at it, after carefully seeing that it was well away from Wendern's line of sight, and then smiled triumphantly as if something had immensely pleased him. He seemed afraid to sit down lest he should be drawn into a conversation he wished to avoid. "I only looked in to ask if Lant had turned up?" he explained.

"No, but he has come as far as Paris."

"He'd better come as far as England, and Lon-

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don at that. Have you been getting news from home, or anywhere near?"

"More than enough about the lawsuit; it's down for hearing next week," Wendern answered. There was a pause before he added, "I've been thinking lately about Sandway Strip."

"That's curious. What have you been thinking, George?"

"I want to see it—there are places for which one's eyes grow hungry."

"Well, there isn't much to be said for it in the way of looks."

"Somehow it's home."

Then Parker made what he considered a joke. "I expect it's too far off for what they call 'weekends' in England?"

"It might do some day for a year-end—a year-end and a year-beginning."

Parker got up to go. "Pity you sold the rest," he said. "There's that ranch beyond the creek, the one you let Tim Bradley have. He's in a big way now; he made thousands over the transaction."

"Luck for him," Wendern answered absently: there was another pause. Parker went a step towards the door.

"George," he said suddenly, "you and I have been friends for pretty long——"

"Pretty long," Wendern echoed.

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“And you’d forgive me a good deal, I take it—even a big mistake, if I was to make one?”

“Anything. But what the deuce do you mean?”

“I’d rather you didn’t ask. I’ll tell you when I know for certain.”

Wendern put his hand on Parker’s high shoulder and asked, “Have you dined at the Carlton lately?”

“Well, not exactly at the Carlton—there are other places, not bad ones either. All right then, George, I’ll go, and I take it that nothing will make a break between us?” With which enigmatical remark he departed.

But Wendern had no time for Joe Parker and his mystery. Every moment wrested from the strident complications of the hour he gave to the woman who had become the central figure of his life. In some strange manner he felt that she had pushed him aside for a little space, not because she failed him at heart, but because some obligation, some question she was bound to recognise and consider, demanded her thoughts, her reasoning and pleading. It was all confused, hidden, and intangible to him, but it was evidently real enough, imperative even, to her, and he felt bound to respect her desire to be given over to it till she made a sign and sent for him. He knew that Mrs. Fiffer was back, he had paced the green lawn, that

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was neutral ground between the houses, in the soft dark hours of the night and seen the light shining from her window; but that was all. The sycamore-tree seemed to be waiting, as he was and as he divined Mrs. Fiffer to be, for Katherine to come back.

CHAPTER IX

HE was right. Mrs. Fiffer was waiting too, anxious and worried, careful not to see Wendern, and perplexed at the manner in which Katherine had gently but firmly hurried her away from Brighton the morning after his visit.

“Can’t think why you don’t want me to stay any longer,” she had said. “I have always been fond of you.” The voice was pathetic, it drew Katherine to her side and two arms about her neck.

“Oh mother, mother dear, that has nothing to do with it. You don’t understand. Perhaps years hence I shall forget as you do now.”

“Don’t see what that has to do with it?”

“I want to be alone to think out things.”

“I might advise you a bit. You’re your father’s child, you’ve got him in you, and I knew what he wanted well enough.”

“But mother, dear,” Katherine said passionately, “you don’t know what I want. There is new life, different life, in my heart, born since he went.”

“I know what he’d want you to do.”

George Wendern

“Oh yes,” half bitterly, “and I know what you want me to do. For you’ve told me often enough all the things he wanted to get, not because they would make him happier, but just to show how much money he had made, and to enable him to go among people who would have despised him once—wouldn’t have let him come to their front doors, mother dear. It’s lovely to be rich, I don’t believe I could do without the luxuries now, but money takes away as much as it gives.”

“It seems to me you’re talking nonsense.” But Mrs. Fiffer thought of her own early days, and knew that it was true.

“One often talks nonsense when one’s aching; it’s one of the straws to catch at.”

“Wish I knew what you’d got to ache about?”

“It hasn’t come yet into words that can be spoken; but I know all you did, you and father, and I feel that I ought to help with the final winning of your battle with fortune. I know how you worked and slaved and longed over there in our country, and how you thought of the things over here in this one, and all you would do if the chance came to you. He left the chance to me.”

“It was such a pity he never came over,” Mrs. Fiffer interposed regretfully, “he used to count on it so, you can’t think; and he would have made a splash.”

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“Oh, yes, we always make a splash.” Katherine shuddered.

“You’ll do it for him,” her mother went on, “and better than he would, I daresay; for you’ve had more education, seen more than he ever did. But he knew what he wanted, he knew and just longed. Central Park wasn’t good enough, nor anything to be had in New York.” She stopped for a moment. “He wanted to be a somebody in England, and he had the means. I was saying to Lord Derbyshire the other day, that the way things were divided was so queer. He sat and told me about his castle and the places he has, and how they were just decaying for want of money that ought to be spent on them.”

“He doesn’t value them or know how to treat them,” there was bitterness in Katherine’s voice.

“I daresay, but I know this, when he told me, with that funny little laugh of his, how he’d got everything except money, I felt as if I were looking at a picture-book, I could see so plainly how it might all be. It would be a fine thing to make everything right.”

“We might buy his castle and all he has; for the chief thing that is wrong about his property is that he is there in the middle of it.”

“Well, we wouldn’t be right in it either—alone. Why, we’d just be ridiculous, as lots of people

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are in this country who take on the things they've never been used to. I've often thought it. You often say that England is old. The finest things in it are old, and new names and new people don't match them—they never look right somehow."

"It's true—you are quite right, mother."

"Of course, if Lord Derbyshire married someone with money to set it all right—why, that would be another thing."

There was a long pause. Then Katherine kissed her. "Go back to London, mother dear," she said, "and leave me to think it all over."

"Won't it worry you staying here with the Lough-Johnsons about? You never cared for them much."

"It doesn't matter, they won't ask questions."

"Well, you'd be better for some advice."

"I'm going to get it—from the sea, and the wind that sweeps over it, and the green downs that go waving along into the distance by the road to Rottingdean, from the sky when it's grey and blue and dark, and the stars that look through it at night. They'll all tell me what I must do; that's why I want to stay."

"I don't know where you get your fine talk from," Mrs. Fiffer said wonderingly; "for that isn't like your father."

She looked out of the carriage window as she

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journeyed up to London—at the green fields and the trees, at all the comfortable adjuncts of the English landscape, “I can’t help it,” she thought, “but I’d like Katherine to be a somebody, she is made for it, she ought to be. I can’t think why these American girls who come over here get made duchesses, while Katherine isn’t one. She would look just right. Why, to see her walk across the lawn makes you think she is on her way to have a crown put on her head. I want her to marry someone she cares for, as I did for her father, but I want her to be a somebody too. If Mr. Wendern had been a duke, that’s what I should like. But I don’t see what good it would be if she married an Australian, it wouldn’t help her up a bit.”

Two or three restless days went by, she was denied to all visitors, she didn’t want them; she never knew what to say to English people who came in their smart dresses, looking as if they’d lived in them all their lives, and sat and made talk while they seemed to be wondering what she had a-year, and how much of it they could turn to their own amusement. If Katherine settled down in England she meant, when she had seen her in the surroundings she wanted for her, but not for herself, to go back to the life she loved best and the people she understood.

CHAPTER X

WEDESDAY came at last. The two days since she had left Brighton seemed to have drawn themselves out to their longest.

“Probably I’ll hear this morning, she’ll tell me the time she is coming,” Mrs. Fiffer thought as she went down to her early breakfast, for she never dreamt of keeping the lazy hours of the set she was in, “in—but not of,” as she once heard someone say of another woman. She knew quite well that the description was applied to her too. “Doesn’t matter,” she had thought at the time, “I’ve got money; that makes them all right to me on the outside, and what they’re like on the inside doesn’t matter a brass monkey.” She was disturbed at not finding a letter. Katherine had not written since Saturday.

Wendern was conscious the moment he awoke that it was the day of Katherine’s return. He got up early and went for his usual ride in the Park.

It was the morning, too, that the deputation was to come to his office. But Lant had not arrived. No letter and no telegram. He was growing desperate. Luckily the Derryford law-

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suit was going ahead, it had begun on Monday, two days ago, and was likely to outlast the week. He had a cable each completed day, and things looked well. With the verdict in his favour he could shake off money difficulties and if Katherine were his there would be nothing in the world left to wish for, unless it were that she consented to let him take her away to the other side of the world to another order of things—for half the year at any rate. This hurrying, struggling London was not good enough; for the hurry and struggle was not for life or sustenance, nor only for fortune, for it often did not cease when that was attained, so much as for some intangible betterment of position; at least it was so in the set he knew best. In the colonies and in America the unspoken, often unacknowledged, ambition of the men was the upraising of their country, to see it rank among the great nations of the earth, not for its size and population only, but for its achievements in those directions that counted among the highest.

Here they seemed to have smaller, more individual longings, and to put too great a value on ease and comfort. The women sometimes did this in the New World; but the men did not, in the working time at any rate. He thought of the faces he had seen during the short stay he had once

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made in the States—faces with deep lines that told of hard work and concentration on the difficulties and anxieties of business. The necessity of keeping the women they loved and the memory of home ties out of their thoughts during the strenuous hours of the day had told on them, it had deadened the fire of passion, such as he had seen written on the faces in Southern Europe, even some of the divinity of love, leaving only a tired tenderness, a rootless generosity for their belongings to soften the money-making fight; but at the back of their fierce endeavour he had felt that there was not only the struggle for individual wealth and position, there was a dogged determination to pull their country up to the high plane of thought and capacity and achievement. In this lay the main difference between the people of the Old and New Worlds. In England they rested overmuch on their traditions, satisfied with what they had been, confident in the vitality of their fading laurels to blind the nations, no less than themselves, to the weakness of what they had become. Men and women alike, after the acquirement of money, had only the petty ambition of place and social advancement that was not worth having, and desire for pleasure that proved itself Dead Sea fruit. "Not good enough to satisfy the heart and soul of man," he said to himself. But he had been dazed with the

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whole standpoint since he saw it clearly, dissatisfied above all with the part he had hitherto played in life, for though he belonged to the New World he had done nothing to justify his existence there, any more than in England. He had to think it all out to discover the right road, now that he realised he had been "lost in the wood of the world" and to be sure that it was the one he desired before he set out on it. But first, and above all, he had to smooth away the present difficulties—temporary ones, they seemed to him, not worth worrying about—and to win the woman he loved.

Back to breakfast. He had seen nothing of Mrs. Berwick as yet. She was a tactful creature, he told himself for the hundredth time, and always kept out of the way when she was not wanted. He looked eagerly through his letters. None from Katherine; he had hardly expected it; yet he himself had not been able to bear the silence of the days, nearly a week, without making a sign. Yesterday he had sent her a little note:—

The time is very long, and I am counting the hours.—G.

But he had no time to think even of her. He forced his thoughts on to the deputation and the points to be made. He couldn't understand Lant not writing, nor why he lingered in Paris. He determined to send a telegram at once, and sat

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down to write it at Mrs. Berwick's table. A fan was beside the blotting-book, it was evidently new. "Joe, of course," he said to himself. "She must have asked him for it and gone with him to choose it, for he would have known better how to buy a hatchet." He stopped a moment to consider Mrs. Berwick and her possible future, "It will be a solution of her difficulties if Joe marries her; I expect she has a battle to fight, and few instruments to do it with—and he might do worse." Then the telegram:—

Stormy deputation expected this morning, wire to office. Very urgent. State when coming.

An hour to spare. He was in no humour for Mrs. Berwick and her civilities, and luckily she was still invisible, but he couldn't shake off the desperate longing for news of Katherine; to be certain that she was coming, to know her train. It might be possible to meet her. He went out to the garden, hesitated a moment, and crossed the lawn.

Mrs. Fiffer was sitting by the window on the ground-floor of her house; she came out when she saw him and stood leaning over the wire fence to talk to him. "It's so queer of Katherine not to write, why she has generally sent me a letter every morning when she has been away before,"

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she said. "But perhaps I shall get a telegram by-and-bye."

"I daresay," he spoke in his usual careless manner and without a sign of the agitation in his heart. "I wonder if you would telephone through to me at the office if you hear from her—it's always pleasant to know at what time a good thing is going to happen." He considered for a moment; the deputation was to come at eleven and would soon be over. "I wonder if I might run down and fetch her?" he suggested doubtfully, for he felt there was some obstacle in the way of his desire. "It's an easy run; I might telegraph that I would be there this afternoon. We should get back here in time for dinner."

"Well now, Mr. Wendern, it's no good not speaking plainly, is it? And I think, on the whole, I would rather you didn't go——"

"Why?"

"I would rather you didn't," Mrs. Fiffer answered firmly.

"Anyhow," he told himself as he walked back to the house, "I must give up thinking about her or anything else outside the office for the next few hours. Many people are concerned with this Syndicate; only one man and one woman in the complication that has laid hold of me—and the majority wins."

CHAPTER XI

“**I**S there a telegram?”

“No, sir—these are all the letters.”

“I thought there would have been something from Lant.” This was at the office in Great St. Helen’s.

“Nothing has come, sir,” Dawson was nervous and fussy; his belief in Wendern held good, still he thought it well to hazard a remark or two. “Things seem a little ticklish,” he said; “we’ve had three or four shareholders in this morning already, asking about prospects. You see, they’ve been a good deal upset with that circular. If we don’t mind we shall have them all down on us in a heap.”

“A few of them are probably trying to create a slump as a preface to a boom.”

Dawson’s face brightened. “I didn’t think of that,” he said.

“It’s a well-worn dodge.”

“It’s a pity Mr. Lant isn’t here for the deputation, or that he doesn’t do something.”

“He will. I wired to him a couple of hours ago.

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Probably we shall hear from him this morning. He is in Paris. The answer ought to have been here already."

"He mightn't have been up, sir."

"He mightn't have been up—he is an easy-going man."

The deputation arrived punctually at eleven. A queer set of men. A little amusement, tempered by surprise, came into Wendern's eyes as they entered. Foremost was Digby, with his head thrown back, red-faced and thick-set. Carefully keeping beside him was a weedy, large-boned man, obviously a Jew; next to him a dissipated-looking man of thirty, who appeared to belong to a better class than most of the others; in the midst of the group a youth on crutches, he was about two-and-twenty, and had a pale face with an eager smile. The others seemed anxious, awkward, or half-reluctant, as might be; in the rear was a parson.

Wendern crossed over from the fireplace to his table. "Good morning, gentlemen, we are not accustomed to so large a party. I don't know if we have enough chairs to accommodate you." He turned politely to Digby, "I'm sorry you had the trouble of coming the other day."

But Digby was determined to show at the outset that he meant to fight. "I'm not likely to

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shirk taking trouble in this affair, as you will soon find out," he said.

"Quite right. And this, I think, must be Mr. Lazarus?"

"That's my name," the Jew answered.

"And this is Mr. Shaw?" Digby indicated a tall, loosely knit man who pushed forward from beside the parson.

"That's—Shaw," he said briskly; he looked intelligent.

"Ah! Good morning, Mr. Shaw. And the others—but I have the list." Wendern looked at the paper in his hand. "I take it that you are all here?" He covered them with a look. "And I understand, gentlemen, that you want to speak to me about this Syndicate?"

"Yes, we do," Digby answered quickly. "There are only eight of us, but sixteen might easily have come. We represent some of those who are thoroughly dissatisfied with the Report, with everything we know about the Syndicate—I haven't come across any who are pleased," he added disagreeably. "Of course you've heard that we thought it right to circularise the shareholders; they're wide awake by this time."

"Quite right again. One should always be wide awake in business matters. What is it you want me to do, gentlemen?"

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Digby barked, "We are going to speak plainly——"

"By all means."

"They are saying precious shady things about this Syndicate in the City, and unless it goes right we mean to make it pretty hot for you."

"Then it's as well to be on the shady side?" Wendern gave them a weary little smile: two men who, now that they saw him face to face, found it impossible to think him a swindler, smiled back.

"We have not come here to joke," Digby barked again. "Perhaps you would like to know what they do say? In fact it's just as well you should."

"I'm not curious; but if it would give you any satisfaction to repeat it, why, of course—" with a little shrug.

"We hear that Bangor was a figurehead; that Lant got the estates for nothing, and they're worth nothing,—for all we know, there mayn't be any estates at all."

Wendern went back to the fireplace and looked at the map hanging over it. One or two of the men followed him and studied it for a moment.

"That is the map," he said. "You can see the various roads on it, and the railway running down to the coast is marked out. I don't know if it's finished yet, but it's in the making,—things are

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not done in a day, gentlemen. I put in £20,000 myself——”

“But the Syndicate found the rest—we put in the rest,” Digby interrupted. “What’s become of it? That’s what we want to know.”

“The Report has already informed you that a certain amount was held back for office expenses here, the rest was sent out for working expenses there. Mr. Lant is Managing Director——”

“And the Chairman, what about him? He’s a lord; but what else does he do? Does he know anything about the Syndicate, or is he a guinea-pig, who takes fees for lending his name? There are plenty of them now-a-days who do that.”

“Frankly, I don’t know him—nor any of the Australian directors except Lant. The Chairman is out there.”

“Well, I looked him up over here. His place is in the market and he divorced his wife, or she divorced him. I suppose he went over there to get out of the way.”

“Do you mean to say, Mr. Wendern, that you don’t know any of the men on this Board?” the parson asked.

“There are two names that I’m told represent successful men of business—Golbreath is one, and the other is Clayton—Franklin Clayton—who gave £15,000 to an educational scheme in Sydney

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ten years ago. These two would hardly have appeared on the prospectus, or at any rate remained on the Board, if they'd not been satisfied——”

“Well, we're not satisfied,” Digby blustered. “Then there's this Lord Derbyshire on the Board this side. Do you know him? and if so, what's the good of him?”

“Yes, I know him, but I'm not responsible for him. Mr. Lant, who invited him to become a director, will, no doubt, be able to reassure you on all these points when he arrives.” Wendern's voice suggested that he had nothing more to say.

“But we've come to ask you questions, and we expect them answered,” Digby insisted. “Our money has been lying idle for a couple of years, or it has fallen into pockets that are not ours. We can't get hold of the men out there, and we don't know anything about this Lord Derbyshire over here. You're the London Managing Director. We took you to be straight——” he stopped, for he suddenly realised that this leisurely polite gentleman might not be as easy-going as he seemed. He added in a different voice, “And I suppose you take your fees?”

“As it happens,” Wendern said quietly, “I've not taken any fees. I want you to understand that Mr. Lant will be in England immediately. In fact I expected him in time for this meeting.”

George Wendern

"I shall tell him I want my £2,000 back," the Jew whined. "Every penny of it was made in good honest trade. I should never hold up my head again if I lost it."

"You expected a large profit—five-and-twenty per cent perhaps?"

"I expected to make five-and-fifty per cent, five hundred and fifty per cent—"

"You should also have expected to lose," Wendern answered coolly. "A man who expects to make five-and-twenty per cent, much less five-and-fifty, is a fool, if you'll forgive my candour, unless he is prepared to lose. Things that are absolutely safe bring in three and a half per cent, or even less, as you know well enough. What have you to say?" he turned suddenly to a good-looking young man whom he had identified as Bennett.

"What I have to say is this, sir. I had a thousand pounds and was engaged to be married. The prospectus of this Syndicate looked fair enough, seemed better than insuring my life. I thought you yourself wouldn't back a thing you didn't know to be good; I'd heard about you from a friend who knew Lant, and between the two I took it that the Syndicate was safe."

"I believed it to be safe."

"One should do more than believe when one

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uses other people's money—one should know," there was nothing offensive in the voice.

"You are quite right," Wendern answered quickly, "I did know, I do. Well, and why did you come in—you, my friend?" he was speaking to the cripple.

"I put in the £500 I got for these," indicating the crutches. "Accident on railway—compensation—I expected to get a little income out of it."

"Poor chap, it'll be all right." He looked at another youth, he was called Dobson, "and you, you are young—too young to speculate in syndicates. Are you rich?"

The answer came with a nervous laugh. "Rich—I rich! Mother asked my advice. She got £500 from the insurance when father died and I got £500 when I came of age last year; grandfather left it. Mr. Lant used to come to the office, knew my governors, he seemed to be all right and I was always seeing your name in the papers. I thought if it paid ten per cent it would be £100 a-year for her, or anyhow we could take the capital out when the shares were worth double."

"Ah, you ought to have known better.—And you, reverend sir?" This to the parson who was trying to maintain the dignity of his cloth as well as he could in the office of a Syndicate which he had been recently told was a wild-cat scheme, "have you much money in this concern?"

George Wendern

“Two thousand pounds,” came the severe answer. “You probably remember meeting me at luncheon a year ago at Sir John Carneford’s? Carneford Manor is twelve miles from my living in the country.”

“No, I don’t remember. I am sorry.”

The voice that answered was grave and measured. “We had some talk that day, and I took you to be an honourable man.” Wendern looked up, but it had no effect. “A month later I saw you were Managing Director over here of this Syndicate, and that Mr. Lant held the same position in Australia. I had often met him when we were in London; he came to see my little son and most kindly took us all to the Hippodrome. I imagined that the affair was sound in every way, and that I might provide for my children more adequately than by investing the £2,000 in the usual securities. I was told I should double my capital. Sir John Carneford thought so too, and advised me to do it; he put in £1,000 himself——”

“All very well for Sir John Carneford, but capital is seldom doubled without risk, and risk of this sort is not good for men in your profession.”

Digby saw his chance. “Look here, Mr. Wendern, this deputation has come to find out where the money is, not to be told what it ought to have done with it. We know that by this time. I call it a piece of impudence——”

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“You will be good enough to be silent,” Wendern said firmly.

“What do you mean by risk of this sort?” Bennett asked him.

“I mean that these Estates were bought for development on the chance of their proving to be worth much more than was paid for them; and whether they were or not was the risk.” He looked across at the apparently well-bred man, “What is your holding?” he asked.

“Same as the parson, a couple of thou’.”

“What made you risk it?”

“I met Lant at Ascot, he was there with Derbyshire, who said he was in it. I had precious bad luck, every horse I’d touched; thought I might pick up over this. Derbyshire said he thought so too. If the cash is gone I shall be done for.”

“I see. You were none of you fit people to have the control of money.”

“When you’ve done treating us as schoolboys—” Digby was speaking again, but he seemed to have exhausted himself.

“It is not your business whether we are fit or unfit, Mr. Wendern, but—” the parson began and hesitated, not knowing how to go on.

“And you know, hang it, as Digby says, we didn’t come to be asked questions but to ask them ourselves,” put in a man at the back.

George Wendern

“What is the blessed Syndicate actually doing?” Shaw enquired. “That’s what we want to know; not to be disagreeable; we didn’t come for that, at least I didn’t.”

“The last Report has told you, I have no later information.”

“But, my dear sir,” the manner was courteous, “you are Managing Director, and surely it is your business to have information.”

“No; only to see that when it comes it is duly circulated among the shareholders.”

“Well, but who looks after the business?”

“The Managing Director over there—Mr. Christopher Lant, the working manager appointed under him, and the rest of the staff, of course, with the knowledge and approval of the Directors.”

“But you’re on the Board.”

“Yes, and my part is to manage the business here, but the movements of the Syndicate are naturally there, where its property lies.”

“You vouch for the property being there, and for its value?”

“No; only for my belief that it is there.”

“But why did you join the Board unless you knew a good deal more than you appear to do?”

“I knew Christopher Lant in the Colonies, and had no reason to think him anything but an honest

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man, who had made a large fortune by his business dealings. He brought forward this Syndicate and the working scheme. He told me that he had put in £50,000 himself, and asked me to go into it—I put in £20,000—”

“Fools and their money—” Digby began insolently, but he was silenced by a look.

“I read the prospectus as you presumably did, and the report of the Surveyor and Engineer employed to examine the Estates. I have never been to the district in which they are situated; but I had heard of its resources and imagined—a conclusion based on the reports I have named—that these resources also belonged to the Bangor Estates. I felt justified in risking my own money, and, though I asked no one else to do so, I saw no reason to prevent other people from risking theirs. Developments of large estates are not executed in a day.”

“You see all we know about this Syndicate is what you two men have chosen to tell us,” Shaw said.

Wendern gave a shrug. “Men are hanged or saved on the evidence of their fellow-men—”

“Not at second-hand—for you haven’t even seen the place—seen nothing in fact, but Lant and the prospectus.”

“Our reverend friend here who preaches salva-

George Wendern

tion,” Wendern nodded at the parson, “hasn’t seen Heaven, only read about it.”

“My dear sir—” the reverend gentleman was shocked.

“I’m simply trying to prove,” Wendern explained, “that the world couldn’t go on if we didn’t trust men whom we have no reason to believe are liars and scoundrels.”

Digby, at a loss what to do in face of Wendern’s manner, muttered, “I don’t care if it costs me £5,000, I’ll make it hot for you all if my £500 is lost.”

“Lost! If our money is lost it would break my wife’s heart,”—the parson said it to himself, but Wendern heard. The words were like a lash.

“I’d rather drown than tell mother if her money’s gone,” the young man put in piteously.

“You were none of you, as I said just now, fit people to speculate in a concern of this sort,” Wendern repeated, but there was something in his voice that reassured the anxious ones. “The issue was altogether too important to you, and should have been left to richer men. Luckily there is no reason yet to think this Syndicate a swindle, as such things often are, though the Estates may turn out ill or well. In any case the losses will not be very great, for the largest shareholder, after Mr. Lant and myself, only stands to lose

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£3,000. There are not more than fifty people in it altogether. I have proved what I thought of it by putting in my own money, and I stand or fall with you."

"Well," said Shaw, "we expect you to see that we don't fall. You can afford to lose a bit, probably have more than you know what to do with, we haven't—it's the other way round, in fact."

"If you and Lant are millionaires," put in Digby, "why didn't you take up our shares between you and run the accursed thing yourselves?"

The idea seemed to amuse Shaw. "What's a millionaire for," he said, "if he doesn't take the monster chance?"

"That's a very interesting proposal," Wendern looked up as if struck by the remark. "I should like to consider it, say till next week."

"We should like it settled this week," Digby growled, "and you'd better think it over. You'll have a hailstorm about your head soon, when they've taken in the drift of our circular."

The boy entered with a telegram, Wendern's heart leaped. "This may possibly be from Lant," he said. "It is!"—he looked up triumphantly, and read—

*In London immediately, call meeting for Thursday next week.
Letter follows.*

George Wendern

Digby gave a grunt.

Shaw, easily appeased, said, "Well, I suppose we shall know something then?"

"All I can say to you now, gentlemen, is that the meeting will take place on Thursday. Mr. Lant's telegram has come at the psychological moment."

Digby considered for a moment before he said, "Well, we'll wait till Lant comes and no longer."

"Not a minute longer," Lazarus added.

The deputation turned to go, but the parson stopped for a parting word, "Remember, Mr. Wendern, that it isn't only ourselves who will suffer," he said, "but those innocent ones who belong to us; they will have to pay the penalty of our reprehensible carelessness."

"I say, can't directors who ruin people be had up now?" asked the youth who had invested his mother's insurance money. "Sent to prison and that sort of thing?"

"There ought to be a hanging penalty attached to it," Digby grunted.

"Quite right, it ought to be a capital offence," the Jew snuffled.

"I should like to go to their execution." Digby was recovering.

"You shall all of you come to mine," Wendern told them with a smile—"if it takes place. I fear you must wait to assure yourselves of that

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probability till after the meeting, of which a notice will be sent you. Good morning."

Shaw turned back and held out a hand. "I believe you'll get us out of the hole if you can," he said cheerily.

Wendern's face lighted up as he answered, "There isn't going to be any hole, but if there is I'll get you out."

"Good morning, Mr. Wendern," the parson said severely.

"He takes it pretty coolly," Digby was heard telling the others as they went downstairs, "but we shall hear what Mr. Christopher Lant has to say."

Wendern gave a gasp of relief when the door was shut, and read again the latest cablegram of the Dock case. "They shall be safe in any case," he said to himself. He put down the cable and looked at Lant's telegram. "He can't be a scoundrel," he thought; "reckless and easy-going, but not a scoundrel."

Suddenly he remembered—and rang the bell. "Is Mr. Parker here?" he asked the boy.

"Yes, sir, waiting."

"Tell him to come up."

CHAPTER XII

“WELL,” Parker asked, “how did it go?”
“Badly.”

“I thought so; a windy sort of a chap down-stairs, evidently a fool, who was afraid to come up, confided in me.”

“They were all fools—or knaves.”

“You seem put out a bit?” Parker examined the strength of the chair, as usual, before he sat down.

Wendern took out his cigarette case. “I am; not by them, but by my own folly. I wonder if you ever saw the prospectus of this precious Syndicate. I’ll show you it;” he opened a drawer at the bottom of the writing-table.

“You needn’t trouble, George, I saw it out there.”

“Do you know anything about the Directors? To my eternal disgrace I hardly know anything, though I’m one of them.”

“Well, the Chairman is a guinea-pig who traded on his title—the only capital he had. They didn’t think much of him in Los Angeles. I came across him there after they’d done with him in Australia.”

George Wendern Gave a Party

For the first time in his life Parker saw Wendern looking almost fierce. "There's Franklin Clayton," he said, "his name weighed a good deal with me; he gave £15,000 to the Technical Education scheme in Sydney."

"That was some years ago. He'd been dead a good while before this prospectus was put up, I can tell you."

"Dead!"

"I suppose this is a son or some relation called after him; I don't know anything about him."

"Why didn't I hear of his death? it must have been in the papers."

"You see you've been drifting about the world a good deal, George, and lost touch with things out yonder."

"It is eight years since I was there. Do you know anything about James Golbreath?"

"There are a good many Golbreaths knocking round at various doors; this James has been mixed up in all sorts of concerns, but I never heard of one he had to do with that came to any good. There was no harm in him—he was a happy-go-lucky, borrow-your-money, stand-you-a-drink sort of customer. But you're always such a dreamy chap. Most men mixed up in a Syndicate business are wide-awake, you can take my word for that, and ready to pick the pocket of their father's

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ghost when he comes round to haunt them—if he died with any coins in it.”

“I ought to be shot.”

“Not so bad as that, George.”

“Yes, as bad as that. But I never understood the value of money till I wanted it myself.”

Parker watched Wendern roll his cigarette and light it.

“You see you always had it.”

“My people were poor enough once; then they scooped it in, but they had not learnt how to use it before they died.”

“Well, when your turn came you gave it away right and left, so you have nothing to reproach yourself with anyhow. Every poor devil who brought you his tale went away richer than he came.”

“Because I had more than I knew what to do with. I only gave what I didn’t want and didn’t value.”

“You didn’t hoard it; you weren’t a miser.”

“There’s no virtue in abstaining from a vice you are not tempted to commit,” Wendern said bitterly. “I gave because people asked me, and it was easier to give than to refuse. If they were poor, I gave, so that I mightn’t be worried by thinking of their poverty. I took no trouble to see that the money would be spent wisely, or that

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the people who had it were not impostors. I gave for any scheme that amused me—or to any jack-ass I liked who had a tomfool scheme on—in fact, I gave; but not for the sake of any good it might do. How much does that sort of generosity count to one? What did it cost me to give? It was no effort. I didn't miss anything, went without nothing.”

“Well, it's better to give than to hoard. A good circulation is everything, whether it's blood, or money, or a newspaper.”

“And this precious Syndicate. Lant amused me—I liked his insolence—his confidence; he asked me to put in £20,000, and I did. And because I put in my easily gained thousands, people who had seen me about in London, or who had heard that I was rich, or were deceived by the precious prospectus, put in money they could ill afford, all they had. And some of them—many of them, perhaps—stand to be ruined in consequence. But I'll prevent that, though I sell my last stick. Directors of companies who take no trouble about their responsibilities, guinea-pigs, hawkers of one-pound shares, who think of nothing but their own battening and fattening, while the fools who are caught by their names starve, or break their hearts, are often worse thieves than the men who go to prison for vulgar stealing.”

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“But you’re not one of them, George?”

“I identified myself with them. I did from want of thought, or knowledge, what other men do deliberately. The result is the same; and it’s the results that matter to others.”

“That’s true, George, that’s true.”

“Great God! If I could only pay off these little shareholders.”

“You will. The Dock case will settle up matters for you.”

“The Dock case may go against me.”

“Well, never mind if it does; but it can’t. It’s one of the things I came to say. It’s safe—certain.”

“If that’s so, things will straighten out,” Wendern said and wrinkled his forehead. “Every man in the Syndicate shall get back the money he put in through any influence of mine, and Lant shall do the same with the rest—or I’ll throttle him. Who gave you your information?”

“The Agent-General; I’ve just been to him. He had a cable.”

“It seems to be making a stir; the papers give an account of it every morning, and they cable me the pith of each day’s hearing. If it goes right the worries will be at an end.”

“I think they are coming to an end, George.”

Wendern vaguely wondered at his confidence.

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"Well, I shall have learnt a lesson. Let's talk of something else."

There was a pause before Parker ventured to ask, "Seen Miss Fiffer lately? I should like to know how things are going in that direction?"

Wendern realised then how anxious he had been about the Syndicate business from the fact that for the last hour he had forgotten he was expecting to hear from Katherine. "I went to see her the other day; she's coming home this afternoon, I believe," he said.

"Well, she's got some cash; if you marry her—"

"I shall never touch it. Not a penny of it, not a cent; I've made up my mind to that."

"But what would you expect her to do with it?"

"Keep it. Spend it as she likes best—and have it out with her own conscience. Oh, I've thought things over in the last few days, Joe, and I'll tell you this, we talk of educating the poor and suffocate them with stuff of no use to them, but it is the rich who need educating and the responsibility of money is the first thing they have to learn."

"You see, they like to get something out of it for themselves."

"Of course they do. I don't mean that they should give it all away to charities or to a class

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that is poor only because it won't work. The idle poor are as bad as the idle rich—worse, for their idleness often brings consequences more tragic, or more immediate at any rate. It's too big a subject to discuss now; but if I were a law-maker, fooling away money should be a crime—not spending. The men who knows how to spend properly is all right, but the people who fool it away, rich or poor, are criminals."

"You don't mean they oughtn't to amuse themselves occasionally?" Parker was a little upset.

"Of course not, though there's too much pleasure-seeking now in every class, if pleasure is the right name to give to going night after night to the stalls of the theatre or the gallery of a cheap music-hall—they are the two ends of the stick—till there's no home life left. Slow suicide, Joe, to the best side of them all, the everlasting bout of thoughtless racket that goes on now."

"You know," said Parker after a pause, "it's rather pleasant to fool away money occasionally—on a woman, for instance."

"You're finding that out, are you? You had better go back to Australia, Joe. How much did you give for that fan, by the way?"

"Did she tell you about it?" the backwoodsman asked sheepishly. "Didn't think——"

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The telephone bell rang. Wendern turned to it feverishly.

"Katherine is staying at Brighton till to-morrow," he said when he had replaced the receiver. "I should like to motor down and fetch her, but for some reason the mother doesn't want me to go, and for the life of me I can't think that Katherine does."

"Then I wouldn't. Besides, I should say it's a good thing not to let a woman see you're eager."

"But I am." It was said under his breath. "My life is hanging on her."

Parker slowly elaborated what he considered to be a joke. "I don't hold with any sort of hanging," he said, "but I'm beginning to see that if one takes to thinking about a woman at all, a good many things have a way of hanging themselves on her."

Dawson entered. "Sir John Carneford, sir."

Parker held out his hand. "You'll see me again soon, and I shouldn't wonder if I'm going to give you a surprise," with which lucid remark he departed.

CHAPTER XIII

SIR JOHN CARNEFORD was a fussy gentleman of fifty, a little grey, and growing stout, but still a good figure of a man. "The matter is this," he said when they had exchanged greetings, "I've come up on purpose to see you. Cyril Graham, our vicar—you met him when you came over to luncheon at Carneford last year—is very anxious about your Syndicate—"

"He was here just now."

"Oh! I knew he was upset, but I didn't know he was in London. He had a couple of thousand to invest; he asked my advice, and I told him to trust it to Lant. I put in a thousand myself, and to tell the you truth, I can no more afford to lose the money than he can."

"A little more, I should say."

"Well, it would be most inconvenient. You see, he had heard that Lant, who was very kind to his children was a millionaire, and I knew you. Naturally, I thought nothing could be better."

"If the thing went wrong, I suppose you wouldn't let him lose his money?"

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"I don't want to lose mine," Sir John answered testily.

"Still, when a poor man, or any one else, asks your advice about investments you should send him to a banker or a family lawyer, who would tell him that the Directors of a Syndicate for exploiting Australian estates—no matter how honest they may be—are not the right people to invest money with."

"You don't mean that the thing isn't safe?"

"I don't know."

"Don't know!" The good gentleman was astounded.

"I have £20,000 in it myself."

"That may be a trifle to you, but £1,000 is a good deal to me."

"It's more than a trifle to me. However, Lant will be in England directly, and a meeting will be called—that's all I can tell you." Wendern rose to put an end to the interview.

"I don't want to be unpleasant, but if it turns out badly I shall expose—I mean to say I shall call for an investigation. Lant was most agreeable and vigorous, as colonists often are; but I don't think the fact that a man has stayed at your house should prevent you from taking measures that are right in the interests of justice. And, Mr. Wendern, it was because we all liked you that

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I ventured—" Sir John was raising his voice; he felt as if he were sitting on the bench at the petty sessions in his own post town.

Wendern put his hand on Carneford's arm and smiled; he was almost amused. "It is strange to have to regret that I won your good opinion," he said.

"You are very cool."

"It's no good getting hot. Take my advice, and wait till Lant comes over."

Against his will the other man was propitiated. He had always liked Wendern.

"The fellow has such a charming voice," he told his wife that evening. "'Pon my life, I couldn't believe that he was an impostor, or would do anything at all, in fact, that wasn't straightforward and aboveboard. There's something about him that makes it impossible. I really don't know how to explain what I mean."

"I know," his wife answered.

"I daresay you do. I should think a good many women did."

This was why he held out his hand.

"All right," he said, "I'll wait till Lant comes over. By the way, I met a charming girl on Sunday at Brighton—Miss Fiffer. A great friend of yours, isn't she?"

"I should like to think so." As Wendern

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spoke another telegram was brought to him. He took it quickly, his hand closed over it, but he seemed in no hurry to open it.

“Well, I feel sure you may.” Sir John felt that he was expected to say something more. “A great heiress, isn’t she?”

“I suppose so,” Wendern answered coldly. Why did a middle-aged man’s thoughts turn as naturally to money as a young man’s to love?

The door opened and Derbyshire appeared. Sir John, about to depart, pulled up. “Ah, how do you do, Derbyshire? You’re in this Syndicate too—Director, eh!”

“That’s it. I’m in.”

“Have you come to look after it?”

“Of course. How do, Wendern?”

“Well, perhaps you can tell me something about it?” Sir John said.

“Can’t tell you anything about it—wouldn’t do—business is business. But it’s all right,” Derbyshire answered. He gave the elder man a nod of dismissal; it was taken and the door shut.

Wendern had read his telegram, and was scrunching it in his hand; he had hardly heard the brief conversation of a moment ago.

He looked up. Derbyshire was waiting. “Well, what is it?” he asked impatiently.

“Look here, I’ve got some money in this show of yours.”

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“Of yours too—you are a Director.”

“Of course, but I don’t know anything about it.”

“You didn’t make any inquiries before you went on the Board?”

“Not a bit. Lant said it was all right, so I didn’t see why I should worry. But I’ve got a thousand pounds in it.”

“You didn’t pay the thousand?”

“Oh no, of course not, I never pay anything—not so extravagant as that. Lant wanted the use of my name on the prospectus, and I wanted a thousand pounds—always do. I didn’t get it, but he said I should, and a good deal more as well—out of shares allotted, you know.”

“Ah! You met Lant before you knew me, at Grantham Abbey?”

“That’s it. Well, I’m rather hard up just now; you can keep my name on or off as you like, but I’ve been wondering whether you’d let me have the thousand pounds out, and I’ll let you have ‘the good deal more as well.’”

“Your generosity is overwhelming.”

“Don’t know about that, but I call it a fair offer, and you know all about Lant—it was Lant put me on to you. Thought you’d be rather pleased, especially after the telegram I had from him this morning.”

“Telegram you had? A telegram from Lant?”

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Derbyshire nodded. "Says he'll be in London this week. Staying at the Grosvenor Hotel, and the Syndicates doing brilliantly. That's why I thought you'd let me have the thousand, don't you know."

"You must wait till he comes."

"Oh." Derbyshire was evidently disappointed. "Well, but—anyhow, couldn't you let me draw, say five hundred? You've no idea how useful money is; fact is, I went to Brighton a few days ago, and—look here, I should like to tell you something, ask your advice. You know I've been mixed up rather with that little girl at the Prince's Theatre, and she's not likely to cut up rusty at all, awfully good sort; but—there's Miss Fiffer—and—well—"

"I would rather not discuss Miss Fiffer—or the little girl."

"Oh—all right. Can you let me have that £500?"

"No, I can't let you have that £500."

"Oh, I say." Derbyshire sat down. "Look here, Wendern, you mustn't mind my telling you, but people are saying rather awkward things about this Syndicate."

"I'm sorry, but I'm busy, and you must let me send you away. Lant will tell you anything you want to know when he comes."

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"Oh—well, I must get some food, and catch a train—2.30 at Victoria."

There was a slight movement of Wendern's head.

"Sure you can't manage £500?" Derbyshire asked. "I'm rather up a tree."

"Quite sure."

"Very singular. Well, good-bye." He hesitated; his manner was pleasant and boyish. "I say, old chap, you look rather down on your luck; hope you're not up any sort of tree, too? It's an awful bore, you know."

"No, it's all right, and you'll get down yours when Lant comes."

"Glad of that. Good-bye." He hurried away.

Wendern smoothed out the telegram in his hand and read it again.

It ran—

Returning to-morrow afternoon. Come and see me at our house at six. Please do not come to Brighton or write.

Katherine.

Six o'clock to-morrow. He counted the time. It was half-past one now. Twenty-eight and a half hours till he saw her.

CHAPTER XIV

TWENTY-EIGHT hours and a half. The deputation had forced itself on his consideration for the morning, but he knew that all the time he had been waiting for her. And that the visit to Brighton had satisfied him in spite of the restraint in which she had seemed to hold herself, and of some things he had not been able to understand, for she was his; he felt it, knew it—to doubt her, as he had said to Parker, would be to insult her. As for Derbyshire, what did he matter? He might fool round her as much as he pleased.

Katherine! He could see her walking across the lawn, her tall slim figure, her light free step as if her feet touched the ground with a proud love of it. He dared not remember the look in her eyes the other night, it made his brain whirl, and he wanted to keep it clear for business matters that still demanded attention; but every day and night that passed wove her closer and deeper into his life. Twenty-eight hours and a half till she came, sixty minutes to every hour—he could be calm enough outwardly; but it seemed impossible

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to live through them. "If she and I were only a few thousand miles away in some part of the world which is as God left it, with the chance of coming back to this country she is so fond of when we'd thought out a sane scheme of life—" he said to himself. But his eye caught a heap of letters and papers as yet untouched. He shunted her (as he called it) to a siding in his thoughts while he resolutely turned to the business of the Syndicate. There were dozens of letters brought down by the circular, grumblings, complaints, threatenings; each writer intent on himself and his bit of money without a thought of the possible difficulties to be encountered by a large concern and the development that was frankly, from the outset, a speculative one. "It's the old story," he thought, "they are hampered by the whisperings of the devil, and the difficulties of living with any satisfaction to themselves in the midst of what is called a great civilisation."

He sent for Dawson, "I want to know," he said, "if you made out that list of shareholders?"

"Yes, sir."

"I will go through it."

For the next hour he was hard at work. It dismayed him to find, from a receipt among some papers, that it was through him that Digby had come into the Syndicate. Wendern had never

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seen him till the day he presented himself at the office, knew nothing about him. It seemed that he was a surveyor and land-valuer; and a couple of summers ago, when the Bangor scheme was first before the public, Wendern had taken a little place in the country for a few weeks; there had been no garage to it, and one had been rented through Digby, who had thus heard of the Syndicate, and associated it with his evidently rich tenant.

The number of small investors, mostly brought in by Lant, was considerable, and the sum involved came to more than it had seemed at a rough guess. "It doesn't matter," Wendern said, "they shall get their money back or both of us shall pay the piper. Luckily, if Lant proves to be a scoundrel, he is a good-natured one; that has always been to his credit."

He went carefully over the list of shareholders, and set down on a separate sheet those for whom he considered himself responsible; there were not more than twenty altogether. In a third list he put the small ones brought in by Lant, and against them their position, so far as could be ascertained, with conjectures of what the loss of their money might mean to them. It was in this third one that most of those he had seen to-day were included—Bennett, Shaw, the boy on crutches, and the youth who had speculated with

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his mother's money. "I'm glad I'm not responsible for the poor young fools," he thought, "but it's rough that they should start out into the world with this sort of experience. A good lesson, the moralist might say—but the moralist is only a prison warder of the better sort, who usually leaves his keys about."

Dawson was longing to ask questions concerning the analysis, but he had not the courage, till the business being finished and the papers put away he ventured to say, "You don't think there's anything to be nervous about, sir?"

He was answered in a rather sharp manner, for the "chief," "Whether there is or not, you will get your money. Copy out these lists and have them ready in the morning."

He looked up at the clock. Half-past two. Twenty-seven hours and a half. They had to be filled. He felt that it was impossible to go back to Princes Gate and look across at the house at right angles to his own. For a minute, in his thoughts, he walked up and down the lawn and stood beneath the sycamore-tree by the gate that led into the Fiffer "bit." There were many other trees; their July leaves screened the windows and softened the walls of the houses. It was a wonderful thing to have that green space behind. In front of his house (though not, of course, of the

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Fifers'), beyond the private roadway and the main road beyond, the park stretched away to an indefinite distance; and an indefinite distance of any sort always appealed to him. Lant had done well for him in making him take that house. He wondered if Katherine would ever live in it. Then it would be good to come home to sometimes, from the long journeys and the staying away at the world's end that he often vaguely imagined. It was differently arranged from those next it; the staircase had been turned round so as to give a wide dining-room opening out to the back, as did the morning-room. Idly, and just for the pleasure of it, he planned various improvements that were possible. Perhaps, if Katherine came—he pulled himself together. Dawson was waiting.

"It seems to me you must be hungry," Wendern said to him, prosaically enough; "it must be a long time since you had food."

"It doesn't matter, sir."

"It matters a great deal; I must want some too. We'll go together somewhere." Dawson was overcome, for he adored Wendern. "While we are eating the car can be getting towards me." He telephoned to Rogers to send it to the Grill Room entrance of the Carlton in half an hour, with things in it sufficient for a night's absence. He had remembered a quiet inn near Farnham; he

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had gone to it late last year with a man he knew, for some wild-duck shooting over the ponds. It had been quiet then; it would probably be full now with summertime guests. They would be sitting at the little tables in the garden, or pulling themselves about on the water—but he could be blind and deaf at will.

In two hours' time he was motoring himself along the Portsmouth Road, for he had dismissed the chauffeur: he wanted to be alone, to think and dream uncriticised, unhampered by even a servant. He went slowly, to the discontent perhaps of the watchers and the police traps for which that way is celebrated, glad to get into Surrey, with its bell-heather—it was nearly over, dead and brown in patches—its gorse and broom and whortleberries, and the blueness of the hills ranged in the soft distance. He turned off sharp on the right along the Farnham Road, by Churt, and on to the sandy one that led to the ponds and the inn with the wooden balcony that he remembered. They had room for him for just one night, he was told; he explained that he wanted to stay only till the early morning. He thought of the places the sun would have seen after it had sunk in the west and came up for the dawn—the dawn of the day on which Katherine would return. He meant to be back at the office in time for the

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business of life and news of Lant. There might even be a line from her, who knew? He had told Rogers to see that the letters were sent on to him at the office by ten o'clock.

CHAPTER XV

MRS. FIFFER heard from Katherine by the second post, an hour after Wendern had gone to his office. A scrappy little letter, saying that she would be back the next afternoon, and asking her mother to telephone to Wendern, which, of course, was done. The telegram to him was evidently a later thought, due probably to the idea that she owed him some communication.

The morning passed uneasily, laggingly; the drawing-room, the whole house, was heavy with the scent of flowers. Mrs. Fiffer wondered why it was necessary to have so many about, but Katherine liked them. "It's no good my fussing," she thought; "I'll just sit down and wait, and if the show passes the window I'll see it. I can't do anything." She had realised very clearly that Katherine's character was a stronger one than her own, and that she would turn the key herself in the door she meant to open. Something was going to happen, everything in the house seemed to know it, but it was no use trying to guess what it was; perhaps, as she expressed it, "things were tired of doing nothing and meant to be a little startling—somehow."

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In the early afternoon it struck her that she would go and pay Mrs. Berwick a visit,—“She might like it. I’ve no doubt she feels lonely sometimes. Besides, I never do go to see her, for of course, when Mr. Wendern is at home it’s always to see him.” She dressed carefully, feeling that it would look polite, and went by the front door; the garden way across, at the back, was only an intimate thoroughfare for occasional use when the little gates between, that safeguarded it, were open.

She liked Mrs. Berwick, though not for a moment did the shrewd American woman make any mistake about her. She saw the good qualities of the lady-housekeeper and guessed at her pluck, her courage, and endurance. “Daresay, too,” she thought, “she gets a few snubs when she doesn’t want them, and she may like a talk with someone she can be easy with. I wouldn’t mind doing something for her some day. I can’t bear the thought of a woman like that being left on an island, as one may say, in her middle age; for, once her looks are gone, she doesn’t make much way unless she has money or something else to count.”

She turned the corner, and was within a few yards of the house when she saw Joe Parker leave it. “Well, now,” she said to herself, “that’s in-

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teresting; perhaps it's the way things are going to settle themselves for her. He knows that Mr. Wendern isn't in at this time of day, so he must have gone to see her." She stopped firmly in front of him. "Why, Mr. Parker," she said, "I was just going to call on Mrs. Berwick; I expect that's what you've been doing?"

"It is, marm," he said. "I trust I see you well? I saw Wendern this morning, and he tells me your daughter is not back yet."

But Mrs. Fiffer was not to be put off the scent so easily,—"I expect you had a pleasant talk with Mrs. Berwick?"

"I did," he answered, "and I hope you'll have the same."

"I call her a very nice woman."

"You're right, marm, and I won't detain you from her any longer. When Miss Fiffer comes home, perhaps you'll let me give you all a little entertainment?"

"Why, we'd like it," Mrs. Fiffer beamed. "What way would you propose to do it?"

"Well, we might dine somewhere," he said slowly, "then go to a theatre and have supper afterwards, at some other place where there is music, and see the smart people—I believe that's the thing that is considered amusing in London; and if you and Mrs. Berwick will just arrange the

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details I'll take it as a favour. Wendern's one of my oldest friends, and I can't tell you how much I admire Miss Fiffer——”

“It's really very nice of you, Mr. Parker, I'll be pleased; and I shouldn't be surprised if you enjoyed it as much as any of us—you and Mrs. Berwick.”

“That'll be saying a good deal,” he admitted, with a shake of his head and a grip of her hand that made her wish she had forgotten, as she often did, to put the diamond rings on her strong honest fingers.

“I feel sure of it, Mr. Parker,” and with this she went on to pay her visit.

Mrs. Berwick was in her own little sitting-room near the front door, for, as a rule, she used the morning-room only in the first part of the day. Wendern always expected to find her there, ready to discuss any household arrangements. He had told her that it was at her service whenever he was out of the way, or indeed when he was at home too, if she chose to make use of it; but Mrs. Berwick knew that he liked it better than any other room, and that naturally he liked it to himself. Nevertheless, when Wendern's message arrived, stating that he would not be home till to-morrow, she felt at liberty to receive her visitors there. She was charmingly dressed, and had the slightly

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absent smiling air of a woman who has made a recent conquest and is thinking it over.

“It is so kind of you to come and see me,” she said.

“Well, but wasn’t it clever of me to wait till Mr. Parker had gone?”

“Oh, no, dear Mrs. Fiffer, he would have loved talking to you.”

At which dear Mrs. Fiffer winked inwardly and told her of his desire to make up a theatre party.

Mrs. Berwick was delighted; always a little sensitive of the position she occupied, she jumped gratefully at any recognition that took the form of including her in the usual round of a richer world than her own. She thought of her husband’s crew, of how they had patronised her in days gone by, and finally dropped her—she hated them all and never meant to know them again, let things take what turn they would. Wendern, though he had engaged her for definite work, had treated her properly, and always with deference. Unfortunately she knew perfectly that her time in Princes Gate was fast coming to an end. Something was wrong with the money part of it; that she herself might not get a penny troubled her little, for if she was mercenary she was not so in a petty fashion; it was the thought of the good time that would be over that worried her, that and—the reaching

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out of her heart towards Wendern. Sometimes she could not curb it, though she kept a tight hand over herself, for she had grasped from the first moment she saw him that she would never be anything more to him than the nice little lady who presided over his household, to be treated with courtesy and kindness and that was all. But she was a sensible woman who having once allowed sentiment to govern her, to her own disaster in by-gone years, never meant it to do so again. Still, life had its difficulties, and before Parker appeared on the scene she had felt the future vaguely threatening her with some of those she most dreaded. She had sat down and considered possibilities. Among them, whether if Katherine married Wendern, Mrs. Fiffer would find that she disliked being alone and invite Mrs. Berwick to help her through social difficulties and amenities, or to do courier business for her when she travelled. She had smiled a little at the idea, for she felt that such a post might be amusing, and that Mrs. Fiffer would be generous, almost as generous as Wendern, who would give away anything he possessed, but unfortunately hadn't the business habit of making prompt payments.

With the coming of Parker a new era dawned for her. He was not a man to inspire the sentiment she found it impossible to help having for

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his friend, but she liked him, his roughness, his simplicity, his outspokenness. And he had money, that she had made out, quantities of it, and oh! the blessedness of not having to think about money, of never wanting it again. If he asked her to marry him, she felt that she ought to jump at him and be grateful. It wouldn't be the fate for which unconsciously her heart longed, but the longings of one's heart have often to do without the attention they desire, and Parker, if she took him, should get his fair exchange—by which she meant his share of affection and the fulfilment of all his indefinite expectations concerning her. Failing the two alternatives she saw nothing before her but (as she had explained to Mrs. Rigg) advertising again in the papers for another post.

She was highly diplomatic in her talk with Mrs. Fiffer, and to all that lady's hints she appeared utterly unconscious.

"I thought I saw you and Mr. Parker at the theatre the other night, Mrs. Berwick?" Mrs. Fiffer said at last, finding that roundaboutness was of no avail, "and I'd like to know what's coming of it?"

"Oh, there's nothing coming of it," Mrs. Berwick put some well-feigned surprise into her accents, "except that he's very lonely in London and doesn't know his way about. He asked me

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if I would go with him, and I simply hadn't the heart to refuse. It would be so kind of you to invite him sometimes, dear Mrs. Fiffer."

"Well, I daresay we could do with him," then suddenly she put another question. "What will you do if Mr. Wendern gets married? You won't want to stay on here then—though no doubt they'd like it."

"Sometimes I think I'll take a cottage in the country, or perhaps a very little flat if I stay in London." She had never thought anything of the sort, but it sounded well.

"There's always something apologetic about a very little flat—in England, that is; it seems to feel that it isn't a house and would like to be one."

"And they are very expensive—but everything's expensive. Mr. Wendern says happiness that doesn't depend on money is the only sort worth having—but I don't know where it's to be found." Mrs. Berwick's words came from her heart.

"He is quite right, though but for money J. B. Fiffer wouldn't have been lying under a marble monument that is one of the finest things in the whole cemetery—he would have had a head- and foot-stone at most, and a bit of grass between."

"I fear I shan't even get that."

"My dear woman, you'll sleep just as soundly if the parish buries you."

George Wendern

“Oh, yes,” Mrs. Berwick said with a sigh, “I am sure I shall. I get so tired,” she added, in a voice unconsciously pathetic, “that sometimes I think it will be a good thing when it’s all over.”

“If you were going to die this minute you wouldn’t think so.”

“No, I daresay not. But it’s wonderful how we all long for happiness. That’s why we want to be rich.”

“Well, it isn’t being rich that makes you happy.”

“No, but——”

“Why, when J. B. and I married we hadn’t a cent for years, but we were so happy we could have sung for joy and encored ourselves; there was no one else to do it.”

“How sweet!”

“And when the money first came in we didn’t want to be worried by it, so J. B. used it to make more—that’s how he got his pile.”

“And you weren’t happier for it?”

“Not we. The big house in New York and all the trappings were only so much work to do and trouble to look after. I used to sit and think of the time when we’d just one room and everything in it might have been bought for ten dollars and sold for five, and wish myself back there again, or in the apartment house we moved to next anyway; we’d only four rooms there. I felt more at home;

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and J. B. and I had more time to care for each other than when we had to waste it on people who were three-quarter strangers to us. But it's no use thinking; I've got used to this life now, and my Katherine she'd be lost without a big house and fine clothes—she'd be like a chicken plucked of its feathers alive and turned out into the poultry-yard. Well, I must be going," Mrs. Fiffer got up and hesitated, "I telephoned to Mr. Wendern this morning," she said, "telling him Katherine wasn't coming back till to-morrow," she hesitated again, "and I happen to know that Lord Derbyshire is going down to see her this afternoon. I expect that's why she's staying. How it's going to turn out I can't say," she added significantly.

"But last week Mr. Wendern went down too."

"Why, yes, he did, and our friends there were awfully taken with him. They said he had a lovely manner, and a look in his eyes any woman might be foolish about."

Mrs. Berwick felt her way with caution. "And don't you think that they—care for each other? I'm certain Mr. Wendern is devoted to her, every one is, of course; but don't you think—that she cares for him?"

"I don't think they'll marry each other, if that's what you mean. Of course, when we're young

George Wendern

we're often pretty close about our love-affairs, just as when we grow old we are about our money matters, and it's sometimes wise not to inquire into either. I like Mr. Wendern very much—I don't know who doesn't; but I don't mind telling you in confidence that I hope she'll take Lord Derbyshire. You see he has some things that Mr. Wendern hasn't, though of course Mr. Wendern is richer."

"Do you think she cares for Lord Derbyshire?"

"Well, we haven't talked it over—I never talk about a thing if I've set my heart on it; it usually frightens it away."

"And you've set your heart on Lord Derbyshire?"

"I don't know that; but I think it would work very well. She'll settle it herself anyhow; Katherine is a girl who will have her own way; young people do nowadays—it seems to me that parents are out of fashion, though she is very good to me, very loving, and has fine ideas of life."

"I am sure she has," Mrs. Berwick said softly, and rang the bell. "You'll stay and have some tea with me, dear Mrs. Fiffer?—do!"

"It is very nice of you to ask me," Mrs. Fiffer sat down again, "I really should like a cup; but are you sure you are not expecting Mr. Wendern back soon?"

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“No, not till to-morrow morning.”

“Well, then, it won’t matter if I stay. I always think that when a man comes home from his office an outside woman shouldn’t be about; he doesn’t want to see one till he has put himself into a good humour. Of course, his wife is different; she should be there, except now and then, just to let him find out that it isn’t nearly as comfortable without her——”

“Oh, how wise you are, I shall remember that.”

“Especially if he’s a middle-aged man,” Mrs. Fiffer added—again significantly.

Mrs. Berwick shook her head, and said with a little laugh and almost a blush, “You are so wicked.”

“I wonder if you’d care to come in to-morrow afternoon and see a box of hats we are expecting over from Paris?” Mrs. Fiffer asked, when she had finished her second cup. “It might amuse you and, if you found one you liked very much, why, you might be willing to let me make you a little present?”

The answer came with alacrity, “It would be too lovely. May I really?”

“I’ll be delighted to see you.” The kind American was thinking that she would like to make the little woman look nice for Mr. Parker. “And, if it’s really convenient, I’ll expect you at

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four o'clock," she said; "then we shall get a good look at them before Katherine arrives." The clock struck six as she left the house.

Wendern, standing by Frensham Pond, was saying to himself, "Twenty-four hours more and I shall see her."

CHAPTER XVI

THE morning-room was empty the next afternoon—the day that Katherine was coming back—when Rogers, hesitating and doubtful, showed in a big good-tempered-looking man, dark, quick-eyed, and sleek.

“Ah, a charming room, but there’s nobody here,” he said.

Rogers looked at him again. The day had been an eventful one in the household; for downstairs there was the catastrophe that had long been looming, and he was prepared for anything; but in spite of a very considerable experience he was unable to make up his mind whether this visitor, with the pleasant confident air, was a dun or not. “Mr. Wendern will probably be in soon,” he said in a fencing tone, anxious not to give his master away if he could help it.

“Tell him that Mr. Christopher Lant is waiting to see him.”

“A—friend, may I ask?”

“A friend,” the other answered promptly, “a very old friend.”

George Wendern

Rogers was visibly cheered up, and his manners improved. "He's certain to be in directly, sir. I thought Mrs. Berwick was here."

"Mrs. Berwick—who's she?"

"Lady-housekeeper, sir, she's probably gone across the garden to Mrs. Fiffer's—the window is open and I see the key's gone," he had looked for it on the writing-table.

"Fiffer,—Mrs. J. B. Fiffer of New York?"

"Yes, sir. Mrs. and Miss Fiffer live at one of those houses, also called Princes Gate, sir, that go down Exhibition Road away from the Park. The garden belongs to all the houses." He was proud of the superior position of the one he was in.

"Of course. No doubt Miss Fiffer comes to see Mrs. Berwick sometimes?"

"Very often, sir, and Mrs. Fiffer too; they're great friends of Mr. Wendern's."

"I see," Lant turned away with a smile of satisfaction. When he was alone he went round the room, quick and alert, "Miss Fiffer!" he chuckled. He sat down, and appeared to value in his own mind each separate piece of furniture. Presently, for his ears were very acute, he cocked his head and listened, then quickly took up "The Morning Post," and was deep in it when Rogers re-entered and arranged a little table. The striking of a match seemed to startle him. "You needn't

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light the lamp," he said blandly, "I don't drink tea."

"Thank you, sir." Rogers discreetly vanished.

Lant let the paper rest on his knees and surveyed the room again, smiling as if satisfied with himself and the world. "Very comfortable indeed; what with the lady-housekeeper and Miss Fiffer over the way," he gave another chuckle, "couldn't be better, in fact. It's a wonderful thing how this world has turned top to bottom. Wendern, dear chap, would have been a duke, if he hadn't made the mistake of being born in the colonies; and a good many of us had not had the privilege of sitting down in a room of this sort five-and-twenty years ago. We've made the haughty ones whistle; I wonder what they think of Park Lane since South Africa, and the Canadian lumber trade, and a Land Syndicate or two, took it in hand—"

He stopped and listened again. "The worst of these mansions is that you are generally too far off to hear the latch-key put deftly into the front door—there's a good deal of unnecessary solemnity left about the upper class."

The next moment Wendern entered. Lant went forward quickly. "Dear chappie," he said, "how are you?"

The tone that answered him was not cordial. "When did you arrive?"

George Wendern

"An hour ago. We motored to Havre immediately on getting your telegram yesterday morning."

Wendern noticed the "we" but made no comment. "Havre?"

"Havre—and crossed in the yacht to Southampton. But the railway company, like everything else in this country now, truckles to the democracy and only puts on its trains at hours that will suit its business population." He was evidently talking to cover the awkwardness of Wendern's greeting. "In the good times that are gone they would have had trains awaiting the convenience of yacht-owners. However, luckily there was lunch to fill in time—I'm told it's correct to say luncheon now—and a train came along at the end of it. You were evidently in a great hurry to see me, so I thought I had better hurry here at once."

"You ought to have come a week ago." Wendern sat down and faced him.

"Paris, and Naples before it, what could you expect?" Lant waited a moment. "You seemed to think we ought to do something in Great St. Helens to keep them quiet? Curious people—shareholders."

There was no answer. Wendern's thoughts had gone back to the clearing and the little procession across it, with Lant in undisguised grief. He had

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been an alert, underfed-looking man then, with an appealing look in his dark eyes—an appeal to the world to be generous to him. It had been answered, and he had changed: the alertness was there still, but the look in his eyes was triumphant; the mouth closed more firmly, the manner was pleasant but overbearing.

“We will arrange a few details for the meeting,” he said, puzzled at Wendern’s silence. “Then I can get back to Southampton. I don’t want to be in London longer than is necessary.”

“You must make things clear about the Syndicate—they have been getting unpleasant.”

“You should have tempered the wind to the shorn lambs,” Lant said smilingly.

“What do you mean?”

“What I say.”

“You wired to Derbyshire that it was doing brilliantly?”

“Of course——”

“Why did your reports cease?”

“There weren’t any to send.”

“You could have sent some account of the progress of the railway. You said a year ago that it was nearly completed.”

“No, dear chappie—only marked out.”

“You sent photographs of the line.”

“Of what it would be—rather well done,

George Wendern

weren't they? Is there a whisky-and-soda about the place?"

Wendern rang the bell impatiently and waited till his visitor had helped himself copiously.

"There are all sorts of rumours in the city," he said, "that you bought the Estates for a song, not for the £50,000 you professed to pay, that they are worth nothing, that the shareholders will lose their money."

"Quite so," Lant chuckled, "these things are always said of this sort of undertaking, and occasionally they are true. Of course I got the Estates for a smaller sum than appeared on the prospectus, but my business capacity deserved its reward. As for their being worth nothing, when more money has been spent on them—why, they will represent it. You can't have wool without sheep."

"Is the thing a swindle?"

"No, dear chappie, it's a Syndicate. Let us be serious. I came over here and saw that London had more money than was good for it; that it spent too much on eating and drinking and entertaining—in fact, that it was becoming apoplectic. I felt that a little blood-letting would be an excellent remedy for some of the criminalities of modern life,—ever heard the popular preachers go for them, or read the lady novelists?"

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“No,” impatiently.

“I always do. They indicate the direction of the wind. I was bored in country-houses, shocked at the inanities of the men, the extravagance of the women, the devotion to Bridge, the repletion of people, chiefly of those who had made money too quickly—it often has a curiously ill effect. I felt myself to be an apostle of an excellent movement that goes about expressing itself in joint-stock companies with one-pound shares. I said to myself, ‘A little Syndicate is an excellent exercise,’—or shall we say discipline? I saw that anything you backed would go down, or rather up—and remembered the Bangor Estates. Luckily for us, rubber had not yet developed into a boom. I say luckily, for two shillings is a trivial sum for a share.” He took some more whisky. Wendern was silent and he went on, “Still our next move might be in the rubber direction; I have my eye on a little-known island somewhere—let us say between Sumatra and Borneo; the bloodhounds, by which I mean the gold-hounds, have not spotted it. If our present deal fails we might fall back on it.”

“Do you mean to say that the Estates are worthless?”

“Not at all; they cover an enormous area, and were said to have resources—see our prospectus. They only require a few thousands to develop

George Wendern

them, a railway to the coast two hundred miles away—inducements to settlers——”

“What have you done with the money that was subscribed for working expenses?”

“We have run up some shanties, marked out a couple of roads and a railway, indicated a possible gold mine—for anything is possible in this world, and while there’s life there’s hope—agreed on the site of a new township, constructed some photographs—that traction-engine looked very well, didn’t it? we brought it five hundred miles—sent out a great deal of printed matter, and we are waiting for more money. There is none to go on with.”

Wendern was losing his temper. “Would you be good enough to tell me something about the Directors over there?” he asked.

“No,” Lant answered softly. “For, let us indulge in the luxury of truth, there is nothing to tell. They gave us the use of their names. They had nothing else to give—nothing at all.”

“It seems to me that you are no better than a thief.” Wendern had risen to his feet; he was calm, but he looked dangerous.

Lant saw it and was amused. “Go gently, sonnie, go gently,” he said, and took some more whisky.

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“Do you know what this means?”

“Of course. I paved the way for it and wired to some of the important shareholders, and one or two Directors of the Derbyshire type, that the Syndicate was doing brilliantly. I told them that I should be at the Grosvenor Hotel immediately—you remember what I said last time about the Carlton, dear chappie, too frivolous for serious-minded people like ourselves, our—our clients will appreciate the change, and be delighted to hear that we’re going to reconstruct. The new shares will be credited with 15s. paid.”

“We shall do nothing of the sort,” Wendern said firmly, “and the whole thing shall be exposed.”

Lant went to the wide-open French window and closed it. “I never like my left-hand neighbour to know what my right hand is doing,” he said; then his tone changed. “Now, it’s time we talked plainly. Syndicates are made every day in the week; people speculate and lose their money, make more, and lose it again. Don’t be a fool, George. I had the cream off the last deal, we’ll reconstruct and you shall have the cream off this one—or the larger share.”

“There won’t be any more cream. I’ll take care of that. The thing shall be wound up.”

“That would be awkward for you as Managing

George Wendern

Director," Lant said suavely, "especially at the present moment. You are on the point of getting out of the Derryford lawsuit, it will be decided in a few days—"

"Next week. It has dragged on longer than was expected."

"Next week, at any rate, and a large fortune will then be at your disposal."

"It may go against me."

"It can't. And—there's Miss Fiffer, and her millions."

Wendern looked up quickly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean Miss Fiffer. Like the rest of her sex, she has probably succumbed to your fascinations."

"Be good enough not to speak of her—"

"I won't, dear chappie, since it vexes you. I merely mentioned her name, together with the Dock business, to show you that to make a scandal of so trifling a matter as the Bangor Syndicate would be cutting off your nose to spite your face."

"There are not only rich people in this thing but others; some of them came to the office yesterday, in that deputation, who have risked all they have in the world."

"The recklessness of such people ought to be checked."

"Many of them took shares, not merely on your

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representation, but because my name was an honourable one.”

“A priceless possession——”

“We’ve known each other twenty years,” Wendern said slowly, “and lately I have been trying hard to believe that you are not a scoundrel.”

“Quite right, I’m not one,” Lant answered. “I’ve a sense of humour and no sentiment.” Then his manner changed again, and this time there came into it a human quality that had beguiled many in that late summer when he first introduced the Syndicate. “But if I’ve no sentiment,” he went on, “I don’t forget that a good many years ago we stood together by poor Loo’s deathbed,” he took a gulp from the glass on the table, “you were more to her than you ever imagined; no fault of yours, George, I know that, I don’t suppose you ever dreamt it, and I believe that what you did you did for me.”

“I did,” Wendern said, almost to himself. “She was an angel to you, Kit.” It was the first time he had called him by the old name.

Lant nodded. “After she’d gone, a year or two, wasn’t it? you lent me that £15,000.”

“I was glad to do it.”

“It worked like a charm. Everything I touched afterwards turned to gold.”

“Then, by the memory of her dead face—and

George Wendern

of any way in which you imagine I helped you afterwards—don't let the poor devils in this thing suffer. Some of them are very poor."

There was a pause, in which the old memories that had rushed back seemed to slip away from Lant. He looked up with a smile. "Some of them are very fat, and live in well-feathered nests."

Rogers entered with a letter on a tray.

"Take it away," Wendern said impatiently. It was only a dun, he thought.

"It came by hand, sir, and it's marked 'immediate.'"

"Oh! I'll ring if there's an answer." He opened the envelope mechanically, a slip of paper fell from it; he picked it up and his expression changed as he read the letter. "What a good chap. A man I lent £500 to, some years ago, has returned it; the first opportunity he has had, he says."

"Curious thing to do." Lant took some more whisky.

"To you, perhaps," Wendern said, with a little contemptuous movement.

"You are trying to insult me, but I have an excellent temper, dear chappie. Now then, we won't talk any more nonsense, for I want to get away, as I have mentioned already—the *Briar Rose* is in Southampton Water—pretty name, eh? a pretty little woman christened her, she's on board and

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wants to be taken round the Isle of Wight. The General Meeting takes place this day week. I hope notices have been sent? Thursday, I think we said, at 12.30?"

"Do you mean to tell them the truth?"

"No."

"Then I will. One of the men said yesterday that this sort of thing ought to be a capital offence, and he was right. We deserve to be strung up, both of us—you for a knave and I for a fool."

"But then we couldn't pull each other's legs, dear chappie."

"Why, even Dawson is in it for £250."

"The reconstruction will only cost him £62, 10s."

"It shan't be done."

"Then give them their money back."

"Give them their money back!" Wendern exclaimed. "I'm broke with the rest, and have nothing but a large over-draft at the bank."

"As soon as the Derryford Dock case is finished you will be almost a millionaire again, for I know that you have other contingencies waiting. The verdict will be cabled over,—it's quite remarkable how much interest they take in the case even here, and within an hour your bankers will cash your cheques for any amount you please."

"And if it goes against me or drags on——"

George Wendern

“One moment, there’s a lady at the window. Miss Fiffer? No; Mrs. Berwick, I should say, judging from appearances.”

She was looking through the glass, embarrassed at seeing Lant, and carrying a new hat. Lant opened the window and made his best bow. He evidently enjoyed the little incident.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” Mrs. Berwick said as she stepped into the room. “I’m interrupting you. I didn’t know you were back, Mr. Wendern.”

“Pray, don’t apologise.” Lant carefully shut the window again. “I’m only his old friend, Christopher Lant.”

“I’ve heard so much about you.” She held out her hand.

He gave a little laugh and looked into her eyes. “I’m sure of it. What a delightful hat, if I may venture to say so.”

She turned to Wendern and explained. “I went to Mrs. Fiffer’s; she had a box of them just over from Paris, and insisted on giving me this one.”

“A delightful one, as Lant says.” Wendern tried to hide his impatience.

“Mrs. Fiffer thought that perhaps you would go over to tea presently,” she went on. “Miss Fiffer is back earlier than she expected. I didn’t see her; she had only just arrived. And I know

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they'd be delighted to see any friend of yours," she added, and looked at Lant with a smile as she went towards the door. "Do forgive me for interrupting your talk. I didn't know any one was here."

Lant opened the door for her. "And you want to try on the hat again," he said.

"Perhaps I do," she said archly, though somehow he reminded her of Mephistopheles. "I hope we shall meet again, Mr. Lant."

"I hope so," he sighed as he shut the door. "Nice woman," he said, turning to Wendern, "lies so easily—wonder where you picked her up; but I mustn't keep you from Miss Fiffer. I see that everything will be well; she's expecting you. And I'm off to the country till Wednesday night, when I shall return for the meeting on Thursday."

"It won't take place. I shall oppose it."

"Are you mad?"

"No, for the moment I am sane."

Lant turned sharply. "Face it," he said. "Unless we reconstruct there'll be the deuce of a row, and a few strange proceedings will follow. There are some poor devils in this thing, as you say, but some others have come in, not originally but lately, who are not poor. They'll like getting their knife into us, and won't grudge the expense of having it sharpened."

George Wendern

“Reconstruction will only delay it.”

“It will give us time, and time coins more money than a mint if it is properly used. You shall use the money, and I’ll use the time. Then, what with the lawsuit and the lady”—Wendern made an impatient gesture, “very well, then, we’ll say the lawsuit, you will be pretty comfortable.”

“And the shareholders will be plundered again in trying to save what they have already lost.”

“They’ll never speculate any more. You underrate experience, dear chappie. Experience is the most valuable thing in the world. Hardly any price is too dear to pay for it.”

“It shan’t be done. I shall oppose the reconstruction and face the music.”

“Then the poor devils will lose all their money. The shares are only worth 8s. 6d. to-day; though, as they have no official quotation, the simpletons don’t know it, the others do. Think what you are doing. Some of the shareholders are not pretty, and will rather like making a noise. On the other hand, we can put a very tidy reconstruction scheme before them. I have it ready.”

A sudden idea struck Wendern. “Look here, Lant,” he said, “take up the small holdings—the widows and parsons and petty clerks, Dawson and

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the rest—give them back their money now, at once, and I'll not oppose the reconstruction next week. It will cost you well under £15,000. I am only asking you to do this for the people who can't afford to lose; the others live, as you say, in well-feathered nests: let them pay for their imprudence. If the Dock case is decided in my favour, I'll pay off all those I am responsible for myself, or be an accomplice."

There was a long pause. Many different expressions flitted across Lant's face. The one it wore when he answered was kindly. "Well," he said slowly, "I'll do it—just to please you."

"Promise—give me your word."

"All right. I give you my word. I'll write to Dawson to-night to send them transfers. They shall get their cheques before the meeting on Thursday. Will that do?" He looked at his watch. "I mustn't stay any longer."

Wendern gave a gasp of relief. "You have taken a great load off my mind," he said. "The Dock case is certain to be decided before the meeting; the moment it is, those I brought in, rich or poor, shall get out too, scot-free. And even if I can't do it, as I say, I won't oppose the reconstruction scheme."

Then Lant was satisfied. "Good," he said, and went towards the door; the pleasant expres-

George Wendern

sion was still on his face, his voice was cordial and genuine. "Look here, Wendern," he hesitated, and considered, "we're old pals and I'm pretty comfortable—thanks to you in the beginning. I can put £10,000 at your disposal if you want it—but you won't. Tell me on Wednesday; I shall be at the Grosvenor between five and six o'clock. Come to me there, if you don't mind, I shan't have time to get here. The little woman will be with me, she'll figure in the highly respectable hotel books as Mrs. Lant, and I must take her out to dinner and the play that night."

"You mean you would lend it to me?" Wendern stared at him in surprise.

"Yes. A pal's a pal, dear chappie."

"If the lawsuit goes against me?"

Lant nodded, "All the same, if the lawsuit goes against you, but it won't. The money shall be at your disposal. This house smells of orange blossom, I noticed it as I entered—coming events casting their perfume before, perhaps?"

"There are some trees in the conservatory, I'll show them to you," Wendern answered. "Lant, if you really mean what you say about that £10,000—if you will advance it, then, whatever happens, I will arrange to pay off the shareholders who came into the Syndicate on the strength of my name—all of them—it will be enough."

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"Waste of money, dear chappie, but by all means if it pleases you."

"Can you let me have it immediately?"

Lant considered a moment. "You shall have it next Wednesday when you come to the Grosvenor; we'll have our final talk before the meeting at the same time. But you may rely on it, and can set the thing going at once, have the transfers filled in if you really mean to encourage these foolish people in gambling."

"Good-bye," Wendern laughed and held out his hand cordially.

It was just ten minutes to six—and Katherine had returned. The way was clear. At the lonely little hotel at Farnham, in the quiet night he had stood looking over the ponds, and told himself that between him and her there stood a crowd of people who had been led into loss, some of them into ruin, through his carelessness and folly. Now they had stepped aside and he could go to her. Lant would pay off the little shareholders and, come what would, whichever way the lawsuit went, those who had come into the Syndicate on the strength of the London manager's name would be paid off on Wednesday night; they would have no part, no stake, in the meeting on Thursday. The way was clear.

CHAPTER XVII

IN the drawing-room at Mrs. Fiffer's the usual tea business was going on. Lord Derbyshire appeared soon after Katherine arrived, but she took no notice of him; she sat in a corner of the canvas-sheltered balcony and seemed deaf to everything in the room beside her. Her face was turned towards the end of Exhibition Road; she could see the hurrying traffic along the main road, the cabs going in and out Alexandra Gate and the trees beyond. Round the corner, on the right, was Wendern's house,—she was conscious of it every moment. Presently Derbyshire went to the balcony; it seemed to worry her.

“Go away,” she said, “I want to be left alone.” It was half a snub, half an entreaty. “I can't talk—please go.”

He hesitated a moment, “All right,” he said, “I understand. I feel a bit awkward myself, as if something was the matter, you know.”

Something was evidently the matter with Mrs. Fiffer; a little group of visitors had dropped in, they irritated her, she wanted to get rid of them in order to talk to Katherine and perhaps to Derby-

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shire. At last she remembered a picture in her boudoir,—the boudoir that she looked upon as merely a foolish little sitting-room, a worry to use, and containing a great many unnecessary things which the housemaid spent a long time in dusting.

“I think you said you had to go pretty soon, Lady Carter-Leigh?” she said with a smile, to cover her artfulness. “Now, I’d like, if you don’t mind, to ask your opinion of one or two little things I bought at Christie’s last week,—daresay you’d all like to come?” she looked at the others. “There’s a picture, and an old crystal jug with a metal stand to it—don’t know why it has it, I’m sure. Perhaps you’d be able to tell me if it’s a curiosity,—I can’t guess; but I’d like to know what you think.” In a moment she had swept her callers away, and she had not the least intention of letting them re-enter the drawing-room that afternoon.

When they were alone Derbyshire went towards Katherine again. “I say, those Johnnies have all gone,” he said; “won’t you talk to me now?”

She got up and looked at him bewildered, as if trying to remember who he was and why he was there. “I want you to ring the bell,” she said.

“Oh, all right—funny thing to do—thought we were going to have a little time together perhaps?”

She took no notice, but went back to the

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deserted room, and spoke to the servant. "Mr. Wendern will be here immediately," she said; "show him into the library, and tell me when he comes."

"Yes, Miss."

"Oh, I say," put in Derbyshire, "why shouldn't he be shown up?"

"I want to see him alone; I am going down in a minute to wait for him."

"Well, I say, but you know things are different now. Has there been anything—I mean why should you want to see Wendern alone?"

She waited a minute, and when she answered her voice was sweet, but very firm. "We may as well settle things at once, Lord Derbyshire—"

"But you're not going to call me Lord Derbyshire any longer, are you?"

She shook her head impatiently as if it were too trivial a question to consider—"America is a free country," she went on, "and I come from it. Over there women have their friends—men friends as well as women friends—and I must have mine if I am to live over here; you must understand that and not worry me. I'm going down to see George Wendern. You had better stay here and have a talk with mother—she is longing for it; she was taken by surprise, and before she could say anything those people came."

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“All right.”

“Then you must go away; you are dining here to-night, and we shall meet.” A clock on the mantelpiece struck with a silvery sound. “It is time,” she said. “I told Mr. Wendern to come at six, and he is always punctual. Ask mother to come down to the library to me at half-past; say I want her to come.”

“All right,” he said again, with his foolish little laugh, “I’ll do as I’m told; I always take a hint if it’s large enough to see—pleases people, you know; and I want to please you more than any one else.” He shut the door ceremoniously after her, came back to the middle of the room and paused. “Awfully nice girl,” he thought, “but—well, I’m jiggered.”

Half-way down she pulled up with a gesture of despair, but there was a flush on her face, and something like a smile, a sorry frightened one, came to her lips, as with head erect she entered the library. Wendern was standing in the middle of the room. He went forward as if to take her in his arms. “Katherine—Katherine, my dear—”

She held out her hands to keep him off; the dazed look that had been on her face on the balcony returned, but she recovered quickly. “I thought we might talk here by ourselves,” she said.

He looked at her doubtfully before he answered. “It’s what I’ve been wishing for—waiting for,”

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but for the life of him he couldn't make another movement till she had spoken again. They stood looking at each other. He knew that she was gathering courage to speak, and waited till it came.

"I've been thinking of the other night at Brighton." Each word seemed to be ground out of her, though her manner was composed. She raised her eyes and met his without flinching.

"I have thought of it every hour since," he answered slowly. "I shall remember your face looking down at the sea and up at the stars, that came out twinkling as if asking whether they were too soon, as long as I live."

"I said some things I oughtn't to have said. I wish I hadn't—that we hadn't taken that walk."

"Why? Wern't they true?"

"If they were it makes no difference. I wanted you to come to-day to tell you—" her head drooped, a break was in her voice,—"I don't feel as if I can—"

"Katherine beloved, what is the matter?" He went up to her then and tried to put his arms round her. She held him off with a movement that was almost one of distress. The flush on her face deepened.

"No," she said, "you mustn't. I want to tell you—" she stopped again.

"I want to tell you," he said passionately, "but

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you know it, that I love you—I love you. Why won't you let me say it? you are more beautiful than ever with that colour in your face," he bent over her perplexed and wondering. "I didn't think any woman in the world could take my life into her hands as you have done."

"You mustn't say it. That's why I sent for you, I wouldn't let any one else tell you.—I'm engaged to Lord Derbyshire." She staggered to a seat and sat down, waiting for him to speak.

"When did it happen?" he asked calmly.

"Yesterday afternoon—he telegraphed early that he was coming, that was why I stayed on."

"I saw him yesterday. I expect he was hurrying off then. Had you made up your mind when I came the other day?"

She shook her head. "After you'd gone I thought it all out—I told you I had to do that."

"Yes. But I don't understand yet?"

"You see you belong to a New World too, and I should have expected that you would care, as I do, for the things they have here—the things that haven't had time to grow up over there—we come for them—we want them and worship them;" the last words were said in a low tone, as if they were a plea for mercy.

He looked at her again, his voice was cynical as he answered. "Let's face it squarely. I love

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you, and you know it. The other night, when we stood together on that white road looking down at the sea——”

“The sound of it has been in my ears ever since,” she said forlornly.

“There’s nothing so wise in creation—it knows all the eternal truths and was whispering them to us—that’s why I felt that you loved me; perhaps I was a conceited ass, but I could have sworn it,” he waited, but she made no answer. “And as I motored back, all the way along the road I could see your face beside me and hear your voice, as I’d seen it and heard it an hour before. But you were thinking of Derbyshire, and planning to take him—for the things he has, the things of the Old World that I can’t give you?”

She raised her head defiantly. “American girls come over and marry for them. I used to think it was just vanity, but it isn’t. I’ve thought it all out. Father went on piling up money, but he could only spend it on a house near Central Park, and a summer one on Long Island, and carriages, and diamonds newly come from Kimberley——”

“Didn’t they satisfy him?”

“Why, yes, well enough—but he wanted more—he thought I should get it for him. You see they didn’t give him a name written in Domesday Book, and family castles, and armour in which his

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ancestors had gone to battle. We haven't got anything of that sort. They have here; but their best things are going to ruin, they'll crumble away if something isn't done, and the country will forget everything that's made it what it is, and helped to fill Westminster Abbey——”

“But what, in Heaven's name, has all this to do with you?”

“That's where I come in—don't you think it'll be splendid to pull together an old family like Lord Derbyshire's?” Her voice was proud, but her eyes looked almost scared.

“Good Lord!” he said, as if in a dream.

“He hasn't a penny to spend because of the mortgages on his property. He told mother that his fences were dropping to bits, and he can't do any of the things he ought for his tenants. He has a castle that'll fall if money isn't spent on it. It has dungeons, and a moat, and secret doors, and all the things one reads of in history and romance; but that we'll never have in America as long as we live. If something doesn't happen his name will be dragged down with his castle, he'll have to go into trade—or something.”

“Well? Why shouldn't he?”

“It must be pretty bad to do that when you've ancestors who went to the Crusades. No one who has family pictures and armour at first-hand

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ought to be allowed to do anything that is common. My money will set the whole thing right—it'll set a little bit of this beautiful, wonderful country right—the peasants will come back to live on the land, and we'll be there to do things for them, to make them content as they used to be centuries ago—" she stopped as if her courage had given out, and waited for him to speak.

Taken aback by the whole argument, he stood staring at her. "It all seems highly poetical, no doubt," he said at last. "And Derbyshire himself, how does he come into the picture?"

"When he's rich again and among the right people he'll be the real thing once more——"

"In fact, you are going to marry him in order to do up his property and make him solvent; and you imagine that he'll turn into a noble of the olden time again?"

"Perhaps." There seemed to be an entreaty in her voice when she went on, not to make a sorry joke of what was deadly earnest to her. "But it isn't for him, it is for what he represents. If you and I married, no one would be the better for it but our two selves; besides, what good then would the money be that father spent all those years piling up? I want to do my very best by it—by all the years of his work that it represents—to weave it in with the history and poetry

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over here, the things that are beautiful and picturesque, and a part of England itself, the real England that was, before it was spoilt by shoddy rich people who have no sense of what they ought to do with money; I have a sense—I'll spend it properly.” Her voice was passionate; it was impossible to help feeling how keenly she had thought it out.

“You are not in love with him?”

She shook her head.

“And Derbyshire—is he in love with you?”

“He likes me well enough—and he's doing the right thing, as I am. Surely you know how it is with all us Americans who come over and marry aristocrats—or aristocrats who go over there and marry us; we know well enough what we're doing, and so do they—we don't make any mistake about it; but we each give the other a good deal. I feel I'm putting father's money to the right use. Why, his name will have to be in Debrett and a dozen other places where nothing else in the world could put it. I should be wicked just to think of myself.”

“A good many of your countrywomen have done what you are going to do, and rather enjoy it.”

“You don't suppose they've done it for love of the men, do you? They've done it for the same reason that I'm going to do it—and it isn't all unselfishness—don't think that.”

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"I don't. You want to be a peeress, I suppose. Your money and Derbyshire will make you one——"

"But he couldn't go on unless something was done, and that old house prevented from falling to bits," she urged, as if she thought he would come to see the point of her argument.

"Why didn't you ask Kenton the other night to give him a few thousands?"

"He has a son of his own, why should he? He doesn't want to pull down one house to build up another that perhaps isn't as old as his own—I don't know." She stopped for a moment. "You think it vulgar of me, or 'snobby' as the English people love to say. I heard it in your voice just now when you said I wanted to be a peeress. I do in a way, but it isn't—snobby, or vulgar; it's because being one is part of it—part of the things that are historical—the things with which I want to be identified. I don't want to go driving motor-cars to Ascot and Ranelagh, to any of the places where rich people go, or to give big dinners with too much to eat, and big parties with people at them I hardly know, or to lose money at cards; I won't do any of the things that silly people copied from us in the early days, for the right people among us don't do them now, they were our wild oats——"

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"And had you forgotten all this the other night?"

"Yes, I was forgetting—I'll never forget again."

There was a moment's silence. They stood facing each other, he still wonderstruck; she with a wild light shining from her eyes, her hand at her throat as if to steady her voice, and to force from her lips all that with dogged determination she meant to say. She looked like a creature at bay, half scared, but full of a strange courage that helped her to forget the conflicting forces in her heart.

At last Wendern spoke. "Well," he said, "this is a strange sideway into Hell for me, the worst turn that things have taken. I wonder why it is I love you? For I do. I love you so much that I'd like to throttle you as you stand there—and kiss you till you died."

"I'd love you to do it," burst from her lips.

"Then in God's name be natural," he cried, springing forward. "Let Derbyshire have your money, every stiver of it, send it round to him packed in American trunks,—but let us be together; you love me, and you know it."

"Yes, I love you, and I know it—but I'm going to do what I say, if I die doing it. Besides, he couldn't take it without me."

"Heiresses are plentiful enough. Let him patch

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up his castle and cultivate his land with some other woman's fortune. Your father and mother married because they loved each other—man and woman existed before castles and aristocrats, as you call them, had been invented. Isn't that tradition enough for you to carry on? Do what you like with your money, but let us go away together, back to the New World—and you shall be queen of it——”

“No——”

“Yes—yes!” the words rushed from him now like a torrent. “We'll put up a shanty on the spot where my father and mother were all the world to each other when they were poor and couldn't see four meals ahead. Let us be poor and live there as they did, till we can build a palace and buy a crown for you, my dear—my dear who is a fool, as all best loved women are fools——”

“I believe I should be happier, I wish I were a beggar.”

“Be one, as perhaps I may. Let us go out into the open, penniless together—some day we'll build the palace and store it with beautiful things for all the world to see—we shall be its wardens.”

“You are talking nonsense, George,” she said with a queer little smile, half tender, half longing.

Then suddenly he remembered. “Katherine,” he cried, “it's just possible that I shall be a beggar,

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and soon—soon, in sober truth.” After all, the lawsuit might fail; for the moment it seemed that it would mean salvation to him.

“You?”

“If we went forth—two beggars trudging along the highway, or sitting by the wayside,” she looked at him in wonder, “we’d seek the magic way—and find it.”

“The magic way?”

“The dream way. Along it are signposts pointing towards realities.” Wendern the idealist and dreamer was speaking now.

For a moment she hesitated, then with a gesture of despair threw up her hands. “I mustn’t,” she cried, “I mustn’t. You come from a country, as I do, where there’s money, and ways to get it, but nothing else; and, between us, what I owe my people bars the way. I’ve got to do what I’m doing, and you won’t make me turn away. I feel it’s great.”

“Great! High God in heaven—great!” Then he was tender again. “Think what life might be——”

“I know well enough—but I wouldn’t be satisfied with myself; that’s what you don’t see.”

“Oh, yes! I see. And it hits me hard, as one’s virtues often do when they round on one, for I’ve been thinking of the right use of money lately.”

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"Yes—yes—that's what I mean, that's what this will be. I want to help the world."

"My dear, you are a dreamer—as I am."

"Yes, I am a dreamer too, and I mustn't wake; I've got to dream—it's waking that often brings misery." She turned suddenly upon him with "I want you to go; I can't bear it any longer—it's too much. I just beg you to go. Nothing will alter it, nothing in the world. I don't mean it to be altered," she added in the dogged tone he had heard before. It kept him at bay: a minute ago he would have taken her in his arms at any price, and kissed her a hundred times, feeling it to be a death song.

He went a step backward.

"I want you to go," she said again; "my mother will be here directly." Then, as if she were still trying to make him see her point, she went on, in a sad apologetic voice: "She has wanted me to do this—and it *is* great; you may scoff, but it is. I am doing the right thing—I want to say it again—I want you to feel it. The right thing by her and my father. And I'm doing something for the world, this dear Old World that we used to look forward so much to seeing. I'm setting something right in it. Some of us do right in one way, George Wendern, and some in another."

He laughed out in an agony. "The world is

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full of strange apostles to-day. An hour ago a man was with me who talked of robbing people for their good, as a cure for folly or worldliness, a man I had known for years and had stood beside at the keenest moment of his life. And now you—oh, my God! you, Katherine, have turned yourself into a New World missionary who, against the dictates of her own heart, is going out to help the pauper lord; a sweet girl saint, who will have a coronet for her head instead of a halo, a family estate and liveried servants to wait upon her instead of the man she loves beside her and his children about her knees—a girl saint who sacrifices herself for what her money may do, and refuses to think of what her womanhood means.”

“Oh, don’t, don’t,” she cried, and put her arms across her eyes.

“This hour has swept away the best dream of my life. But go and be my Lady Derbyshire, and have your castle and your attendants, your family diamonds that Kimberley never knew—”

“Oh, how cruel you are—or you are trying to insult me?”

He softened then. “Yes, I am a brute, perhaps,” he said. “But think what life might be if we were together!”

“I know,” she said passionately, “I know well enough, George. But I wouldn’t be satisfied with

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myself; that's what you don't see.—Hark, I thin mother is coming.”

He made a sound of derision. “Your mother—yes, dear, your mother.”

The door opened and Mrs. Fiffer entered. Sh hesitated and looked at him curiously, then turned to her daughter and asked, “Have you told Mr. Wendern the news?”

“Yes, I have told him,” Katherine answered. She was a little breathless; her arm rested on the high back of a chair as if for support.

“And what do you think of it, Mr. Wendern?” Mrs. Fiffer looked at him again.

“He's a good chap and deserves his luck—though it's colossal.”

“I'm glad you like him. What I think is that he hasn't got any of the tricks of some of the young men over here; and then he is poor. Katherine would have felt she wasn't turning her money to proper account if she married a rich man.”

“It's a fine idea.”

“She was always full of ideas,” Mrs. Fiffer answered and beamed with satisfaction. “Now, Mr. Wendern, I want you to tell Mrs. Berwick, if you don't mind, that I didn't know it when I saw her this afternoon, or she might think I was unfriendly not to say anything.”

“I'll tell her.” As if there was no more to say

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he held out his hand to Mrs. Fiffer, looked round at Katherine with a smile, and went.

“What did you say to him—did he mind?” Mrs. Fiffer asked.

Katherine was standing now with her arms thrown up, her hands clasped behind her head; she looked like a wild creature who had run a race and was paying for it—with life, and yet knew that the victory had had to be gained at any cost. She stared at her mother as if taken by surprise. “Say,” she panted, “what did I say? I don’t know—but, mother—mother,” she seemed to be stricken with despair, “all things have to be paid for, and nothing so dearly as money.”

“As money?”

“Yes.” She shut her eyes and shivered for a moment as if with pain, “It’s paid for with life and hope and love. But you don’t understand, mother dear, you forget. Go upstairs,” she added gently, “I’ve done what you wish. I’ve done my duty to father’s money. Go upstairs and be satisfied.”

“Well, but——”

“Go, mother dear,” she entreated, “I must be alone, I must indeed.” She kissed the shrewd, kindly face before she closed the door. Mrs. Fiffer heard it softly locked.

Then Katherine threw herself down, and rose

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again and walked to and fro, and had it out with herself. "It's done, it's done, but oh! the misery of it," she moaned; "and George Wendern—George Wendern, I love you, I love you and want to be yours—a beggar, a thief, anything in the world, if only I be yours. This is where your arms went—where your hands were clasped when they held me," she rested her face down on her sleeve, "Oh, George Wendern, I'm a fool, a fool, and yet what I'm doing is right. You will never dream what it costs me, you will never believe; but it must be right, it must be fine, it is, it is as it's fine sometimes for people to let themselves be put on the rack. I'm on the rack now, but I won't flinch. I'll go through with it—but I love you, love you, George Wendern."

There was a loud knock at the street door; she heard it, though the library was far down the hall. Lord Derbyshire had come.

CHAPTER XVIII

IT was significant that Wendern left the Fiffer's house by the front door. The days of communication between the garden ways were over.

He let himself in by a latch-key and went to the morning-room.

Mrs. Berwick was sitting by the writing-table, her attitude vaguely struck him as woe-begone. She looked up as he entered, half-startled,—“Oh, Mr. Wendern, I thought you had gone to Mrs. Fiffer's.”

He recovered his usual manner in a moment, save that a little more excitement than usual showed itself; his voice was almost gay as he answered,—“I have just come from there.”

“Mrs. Fiffer was so anxious to see you,” she said, wondering what had happened.

He went towards the tea things, which were still in the room, hesitated, then poured some whisky into a glass, from the decanter that had been brought in for Lant, and swallowed it with a gulp. “Of course she was anxious. She wanted me to

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hear her news—splendid news. Mrs. Fiffer said I was to tell you.”

“News?” she gasped, “splendid news?”

“Yes,” he laughed out. Mrs. Berwick had never heard him do that before, “She’s engaged to Derbyshire—excellent, isn’t it?”

“To Lord Derbyshire?” she was genuinely astonished. “Oh—oh, dear Mr. Wendern, I hoped—I hoped——”

“Never hope, wait for things that come your way and make the best of them.”

“They never come to some people,” she hesitated and wondered how to tell him of the other catastrophe that had fallen on the house; she had only just heard of it.

“Quite true, but they’ve come to Derbyshire, he’s a good fellow—you must congratulate them. I shall have to get her a wedding-present. What shall it be—a tiara? perhaps she’ll collect them.” He tried to laugh again.

She got up and stood looking at him, wondering, as Katherine had done, whether he were sane, “Oh, it’s too dreadful—it’s too dreadful, everything comes at once,” she said, and burst into tears.

He was surprised and amused, it pulled him together. “My dear Mrs. Berwick, this won’t do—look here, have some whisky—no, tea is what

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women always want. Let me light the lamp.” He went towards it and struck a match. “There—you’ll be better soon. A cup of tea—eh?” He was almost incoherent in his effort not to show his own distraction. “There, it will be ready directly,” he repeated. “Now tell me what is agitating you.”

“Everything is falling about our ears, everything at once.”

“I don’t understand?”

“There’s a man downstairs—he came this afternoon, just before Mr. Lant came—and says he must be paid before he leaves the house. The servants are so frightened, they have just been to me; they are very attached to you, but they want their wages. A man came four times yesterday; the cook says the tradespeople won’t even send in food any longer.”

“But these are trifles to worry about; I’ll pay them—like the head of a middle-class family.” He went over to the writing-table and took up a letter he had thrown there an hour before.

“Oh, they are not trifles indeed,” Mrs. Berwick gasped. “You don’t know how difficult it has been—”

He rang the bell and hesitated, he was evidently rapidly formulating something in his mind. “Yes, that will be the way,” he said to himself, “I must

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leave it till then—but it is a brilliant idea, it will be a surprise, a thing that has never been done before. Not dinner—I couldn't stand them for a whole evening—supper, I'll give a supper-party."

"A supper-party?" Mrs. Berwick exclaimed wondering if he were going mad. "But you don't seem to understand, Mr. Wendern, there's a man downstairs—a man in possession—he won't go."

"Let him stay. No doubt they'll make him comfortable," his tone was absent. She made a gesture of despair.

"Rogers," he said when the bell was answered, "I shall probably be leaving London to-morrow for a few days; I'm not sure yet; but I shall be back on Wednesday. And on Wednesday night I am going to give a party."

"Yes, sir." Rogers was too well trained to show any surprise. "What sort of a party, sir?"

"A supper-party, late—as supper should be. I tell you at once, so that you can think it out. It must be the best you can do; Mrs. Berwick, I daresay, will have the kindness to take an interest in it," he looked towards her.

"Oh yes, of course," she said quickly, more bewildered than ever. She remembered a grey satin dress that became her well, and regretted that it would not be seen by the guests.

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“For how many, sir?”

“I’ll tell you to-morrow, or in good time at any rate, and—” he felt in his pocket and took out the letter, “I want you to cash this cheque—wait, I must endorse it—it is for £500. Bring back £100 to Mrs. Berwick, pay the servants—I understand that I owe them some wages—and any small bills it will cover, with the rest.”

“Thank you, sir,” Rogers answered imperturbably. “I’m sorry to mention it, but there’s a man downstairs—a man in possession, sir——”

“By all means. I hope he is agreeable.” He turned away, Rogers left the room.

Mrs. Berwick could hardly bear it. “Oh, Mr. Wendern, what a relief, you don’t know what it has been—” she put her handkerchief to her eyes to force back the tears that stung them. “What am I to do with the £100 that Rogers brings back?”

“My dear lady, I thought perhaps you might find it useful to cover some little forgotten account of your own.”

“Oh—” she could have cried again for sheer relief, even for joy.

“I want to explain,” Wendern went on, “that besides the trifling matters that have distressed you, there are a number of gentlemen who have—or imagine they have—claims against me. I have

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had a sudden idea, quite a brilliant one, I mean to invite them all to supper—and to pay them. Most of them are shareholders in a Syndicate, and not quite satisfied with their position—one or two of them have been so accommodating as to lend me money, in short, we shall have a motley crew; that is if I can persuade them to come. Before they leave their claims will be settled. I hope it will amuse you to see that their entertainment is worthy of them."

"I shall like it immensely. I shall try and get a peep at them through the crack of the door, or through the orange-trees; I could if I went out through the morning-room," she tried to be arch again, but she was too much surprised to do it well. He had produced £500 without turning a hair, just when she had imagined that no money would be forthcoming, and now it seemed as if these other creditors would be dealt with as well—"in a manner worthy of the mad hatter," she thought.

There was a pause, he took another gulp of whisky. "It would be delightful to ask you to join us, but a bachelor party, you know—"

"Oh, of course it would be impossible—" then, as if on an impulse, "you will think it a strange idea; but there is Mr. Bulson—"

"Who is Mr. Bulson?"

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“The wine merchant—a most gentlemanlike man, I assure you, and——”

“There is nothing to prevent a wine merchant from being a gentleman—he often is one.”

“He has a large account—but he is so anxious not to worry you; he is really very—refined.”

He was quite interested, he looked at her and wondered if Parker had a rival. “I’m sure of it. Would you like me to ask him to supper?” He said it as a joke, and was surprised when she answered:

“Do you know, I was wondering whether it mightn’t be a good thing,” she was thinking of Cyril’s days and the old tactics; “you see, his account is a very large one.”

“It shall be paid with the rest; and Mr. Bulson shall be invited to supper. Perhaps you would like to write the invitation yourself?” He started nervously as the clock struck. “It’s getting late,” he said.

“You are going away to-morrow—away again?” She went closer to him; she put out her hand and quickly drew it back; against her will she remembered that the other woman had refused him.

He nodded for answer, and looked into her eyes; there was an expression in them that took him by surprise, for a moment it embarrassed him, but he recovered quickly. “Yes, to-morrow—and now

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I must go out. I shall probably be late," he added with decision.

"Oh, don't go—" she entreated, "you are better in your own place, and you are worried, I know it—dine at home this evening?" 170.

"At home," he said bitterly, "I have no home; this is only a make-shift, a shelter—the highway."

"The highway, what way?" she asked puzzled.

"I don't know yet," he answered with a cynical sound that conveyed nothing.

"But don't go out now, dine at home," she repeated, her voice trembled. She looked up at him.

"At home! But I have no home. And you've had enough of me for to-day, dear lady, I'll not intrude on you."

"Oh, don't say that—" she broke down and sobbed. "I can't bear it. Don't go—I—I—" she held out both hands now and groped for his.

He stared at her aghast, took the hands, kissed them, and dropped them abruptly. "You, dear lady, are very charming—"

"If you really thought so—" she whispered.

He added quickly, "too charming to allow me to regard you with anything but admiration and respect. My friend Parker thinks you the most delightful of your sex."

Then she realised her folly. She had given her-

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self away, though she had known from the beginning it was no good, and told herself so a score of times. She retreated as best she could, her cheeks burned, her eyes dropped, she covered her confusion with, "He's the kindest man in the world."

"You must treat him well." Wendern looked at her again; this was a queer situation for which he had not bargained. Luckily Rogers entered again—with the cable that came every evening while the lawsuit was going on. He tore it open,—*New developments—impossible finish this week—certain early next.* It would probably be over in time for Wednesday night, but in any case Lant's £10,000 would make it all right for the shareholders, he thought.

"Rogers," he said, "I want you to remember that the supper on Wednesday must be done well—done large, as they used to say in my country; everything, anything you can think of, no shirking, no skimping, nothing commonplace, flowers—quantities of them, the best wines, lots of champagne, lights, music—send for the Corsican Band—send for everything, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir." Rogers left the room with the tea-tray.

Wendern read the cable again. Mrs. Berwick waited with longing, curious eyes, but he said

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nothing, gave her no clue. She was outside his life—and she felt it.

Presently he looked up at her vacantly and said with a smile, "It shall be a party they will never forget. A night of nights,—they will talk of it all their lives."

"Oh, dear Mr. Wendern, are you mad?" The words slipped from her.

"Mad!" he exclaimed, "I'm sane at last; sane as a parson on Easter Sunday."

"Oh, how could I," she cried to herself when she was alone, "and how can I ever face him again. But I couldn't help it—it's no good, he's mad, I know, but he's—a darling," she said it in a whisper, "or—he's the devil." Then, as if ashamed, she added quickly, "The devil must be very fascinating, or so many people wouldn't go to him."

CHAPTER XIX

WENDERN came down late the next day, or rather appeared late in the morning-room, for he had taken his early ride as usual. He wanted to escape Mrs. Berwick; she was a worthy woman, he told himself, but yesterday he had had a little too much of her; still he did not take her emotion seriously, and forgot that for a moment he had done so. That afternoon he meant to go to Winchelsea, telling no one of his destination; to bury himself there for a week. It was always his plan when he was worried, his antidote for all ills, to get away from the noise and hurry of London to quiet and space. He knew most of the possibilities within reach—Richmond and Wimbledon, Wandsworth Common and Roehampton, Chorley Wood and New Barnet, the vanishing Bostock Woods of Welling and Mottingham, to mention a few that could be reached in less than an hour with the car or a taxi. The places farther away he knew even better. To Winchelsea he had only been once for a few hours; it had left a longing to go there again. Those old Crusaders in the

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church, crumbling away in their tombs, with their effigies above them, had slept in peace through many centuries; perhaps he might find a little spell of rest in looking at them and remembering the fascination such things had for Katherine.

Meanwhile there was the morning hour in Princes Gate to get through, Mrs. Berwick was waiting for him; she was so full of excitement that it overpowered the recollection of her indiscretion last night. "Oh, Mr. Wendern," she said, "did you see the paper? The news?"

"News—I had a cable." He was thinking of the Dock case.

"I don't mean that—"

He turned his head towards her, but could not simulate the eagerness she seemed to exact; his thoughts were reaching, across the inevitable two hours at the office and the interview he meant to have with his lawyers, to Winchelsea, to its dreamlike ways and the slumberous atmosphere, to the long hours that would be his in the next few days, undisturbed by anything but the daily cable; he meant to go to the Company's office and arrange for that to be sent to him direct. It was almost a satisfaction to remember that a trifling accident made it impossible to take the car. He wanted to retreat into the past, to plan some vague future, not to be reminded of the accursed

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products of modern civilisation and all the strange doings it had helped to generate.

“Late last night! But it’s most extraordinary,” he heard Mrs. Berwick saying, evidently overcome with the importance of her communication, “and so dreadful, of course. Lord Kenton and his son are dead. They have been killed in a motor accident.”

Wendern looked at her now. “Killed—might be worse,” he said gloomily. “What then, does it matter so much?”

“But don’t you see? Lord Derbyshire gets the title, the estates, and an immense income. Miss Fifer will be a marchioness.”

He was startled for a moment, this had not struck him, he seemed trying to realise what it meant. “She’ll do it excellently,” he answered. “And she’ll like it—she’ll like it,” he added to himself. Then, ashamed of his bitterness, he covered it by saying aloud, “She’s a fine creature, and Derbyshire’s in luck—splendid luck.” He turned to the letter he pretended to be writing, but Mrs. Berwick, crossing the room, gave a quick glance and saw that the paper was blank.

He rose suddenly. “Good-bye,” he held out his hand; he was going away for nearly a week and some leave-taking seemed necessary. “When you see Joe, give him my love, and tell him to take

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care of you—not to let you mope,” he added with a significant smile. “If he asks for me, tell him that I haven’t gone to the devil—yet. Only to pull my thoughts together, and to wait for the finish of the Dock case—and I’ll write to him.”

“But, Mr. Wendern,” she asked in consternation, “there’s the man in possession?”

“Let him go on possessing. Rogers and the rest will take care of him. Everything has to be held over till the lawsuit is finished.” With that he was going; then he hesitated and, lest she should feel any sense of insecurity, wrote down the address of his solicitors. “They will know my address, in case of accidents,” he explained, “but I want no letters forwarded.”

At the office Dawson too was in a state of excitement, not only at the Kenton catastrophe, for of course he knew Derbyshire well, but because Lant had written saying that he intended to pay off any impecunious shareholders in the Syndicate who had been brought in at his, Lant’s, invitation and were dissatisfied with their holding. He wanted their names and addresses; cheques would be sent as soon as the transfers were executed and the certificates returned.

“Seems a funny thing to do, sir, and very sudden. I suppose Mr. Lant has got something up

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his sleeve, perhaps he knows that the Syndicate is worth more than any of us think. I mean to stick to my lot, if you don't mind?"

"I do mind," Wendern said sharply. "You'll sell them, do you hear?"

"Very well, sir, if you wish it, of course. But it seems rather a pity; Mr. Lant isn't the sort to buy them up for nothing."

"He doesn't."

"Oh?" No further information appeared to be forthcoming, so Dawson changed the subject. "I see there's a long account of the Dock case in the paper this morning; it's taken a turn."

"It's taken a turn," Wendern echoed, and busied himself at his table for a few minutes; then he looked up. "I'm going to the country till Wednesday. The case is certain to be decided by then; and I shall pay off the people in the Syndicate who took shares in any way through me—though luckily these are not a poor set to whom loss would mean ruin; I shall do it for my own satisfaction."

Dawson was quite startled. "Pay them off?" he echoed.

"I want you to get transfers ready for them, as well as for the Lant clients, and dispatch them. There are not many, I am glad to say; but I am going to invite them to supper with me on Wednesday night at my house. They will be paid off

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before they leave, provided they bring transfers with them properly executed and the certificates of their shares."

"Yes, sir." Dawson regretted that he was not one of them. "Will it be all right, sir, if you don't win the Dock case?" he ventured to ask.

"I shall win it; but if not, it will be all the same; they will be paid off." He read Lant's letter again; he had found it waiting for him at the office. It ran:—

I will expect you between five and six at the Grosvenor Hotel on Wednesday. The loan will be at your disposal, so get any shareholders who worry you, or are troublesome, off your mind. On Thursday the meeting, and the reconstruction proposal for the benefit of those still in the Syndicate.

You ought to get a yacht, dear chappie, and a fair friend; nothing like that combination for pleasantly escaping the cares and attentions of the world.

He tore up the letter and wondered what the woman was like. He saw through Lant now, and knew him for a scoundrel; but, as sometimes happens even with the greatest scoundrels, he had a vein of sentiment; it would induce him to keep his word about the £10,000. The reason of the offer was too deeply rooted in the bygone years to make it possible he would go back on it: to Wendern the best in human nature was always compelling in the end.

Besides, Lant knew that the meeting and the precious reconstruction would go more smoothly

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if certain members of the Syndicate were cleared out of it, and only the careless of liability left in.

The thought of the £10,000 was an immense relief to Wendern. If the Dock case were decided it might not be necessary to use it; but if it still dragged on, the loan would enable him to pay back the money to those whose possible loss, whether they were or were not in a position to afford it, had become a nightmare to him. His one desire was to discharge every debt he had incurred; and after that—the deluge. If he had any definite scheme of life left it was to rid himself of everything he possessed, and to get away with just enough to take him to the other end of the world. He remembered with a rush of thankfulness that he had not sold Sandway Strip. The shanty he had talked of should be put up. He thought of the stars looking down on it at night, of the cool of the dawn, of the blazing heat of noon, from which the roughly constructed roof would shelter him, of the soft swiftly passing twilight, in which Nature whispered its thankfulness for the splendour of the day that had gone.

“If I once get there again,” he thought, “all may be well; and if I come back to this place, it shall not be as a cumberer of the earth, of no use except occasionally to minister to the vanities of a set of people who have never realised what a mag-

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nificent thing it is to be rich and to have time at their disposal. But I expect few manage to do that till they've outlived the best possibilities of life for themselves."

He went to his lawyers before leaving London to give instructions concerning the house at Princes Gate and its contents. The man in possession he regarded almost as a sorry joke, a queer comedy part, not to be hustled through too quickly. There would be plenty to pay him off, to do something for Mrs. Berwick, and to discharge all the minor obligations. After all, with Lant's loan in view there was no need to worry. Suddenly he remembered Parker's £500—the £10,000 might not cover that too; but it would be paid with the fortune the finish of the lawsuit would bring him. Fortune? This time he would know how to handle it, or rather, he would think out how to do it when he reached his shanty thousands of miles away. Thousands of miles away; the words were full of music.

The lawyers received him as a person of importance, and poured congratulations on him, taking the success of the Dock case for granted; long accounts of it were in the papers. "The papers usually lie," he told them, but the certainty they expressed was pleasant. "Whichever way it goes," he said, "in a fortnight's time or

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less I want you to set about realising everything I possess. I can't take root in this country. I hear my own calling. Make out a list of any assets I have. There are a good many in the house, for I have wasted money pretty freely, and there are some outside it that ought to realise enough to wipe out the minor debts. When the lawsuit is at an end there will be plenty for other purposes."

"Of course." They knew that, better than he did.

"Strange man," the lawyer said when he'd gone, "always gives one an impression of being on his way somewhere."

Strange they should say it, for he often felt that he was in a transition stage from a former state to a future one; that farther along the world's highway there were truths and mysteries to learn, to penetrate, not eagerly or ruthlessly but calmly and reverently; and along it, Katherine seemed, unconsciously to herself, to tread beside him. It made him wonder whether there might not be a companionship of soul, of which the material self took no account, freighted with compensation for all that the being, moulded by outward influences, seemed unable to resist? Probably she was getting ready now for her coming glories. Dead Sea fruit—but she might not discover it;

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besides, even among women, some play for happiness and some for other things: "We all build our own little heavens or hells," he thought, "and of queer material; sometimes not knowing which is which till we have passed the gateway."

All this he thought out in the train, on the platform at Ashford, where he had to change carriages, and in the fly on the long drive to the sleepy-looking hotel and the rooms for which he had telegraphed. He wondered why he did not feel more acutely the shock he had had, for he hardly realised that it was one. His love for Katherine had been the strongest feeling of his life, she dominated it now, she would to its end; and yet, though she would never be his, though his lips would never touch hers again, nor her head rest on his shoulder as it had done in that divine minute at Brighton, though she was going to give herself deliberately to another man—not merely her money but herself, he was taking it as calmly as though it were all in the day's work. It seemed to hypnotise him; he could feel certain minor things but this had left him with only a dazed sense of surprise, a desire to escape everything and go to the other side of the world. "The other side of the world," he said to himself again, half a dozen times; to stay here, on this side, any longer was a condition he could not face. Sud-

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denly he realised why he took it all so calmly; she was giving herself to Derbyshire—herself, her voice, her hands, her damnable money; but all the time she loved him—him, George Wendern. She was desperately giving the other man her body but not her soul. That was his—his. Some higher, better, tenderer self that lived in her, and that the lower self bolted and barred away from him, looked through its prison windows and would escape to him, do what she would. She might live in Derbyshire's castle, and trail into palaces to make her curtseys to kings and queens as much as she pleased, all the time her soul would be his—George Wendern's. It would follow him and he would feel it with him when he was in the little shanty that should never know anything but human love and hope and endeavour. "My God," he said to himself, "I can understand now why Christ was born in a manger."

And so he loved her, for why should he deny himself?—loved her again, though as it were from the clouds.

He felt, too, that he had done well in coming to Winchelsea. That its stillness and peace would clear the cobwebs from his brain. As if to help towards it the cable that was sent on an hour after his arrival was a good one. Ah! Soon he would be a free man, free of all the obligations that

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fettered him now. He imagined the blue sea over which he would scud on board a ship with white sails. He remembered, with a cynical smile, that the day of white sails was at an end, the thud-thud of the engines had taken their place, no matter; if realities had lost some of their beauty, dreams need not truckle to them.

Then some demon suggested, "But if everything goes wrong, if, after all, the Dock case fails—if Lant plays false and doesn't advance the £10,000—if you have to meet those men at supper knowing that no cheques will be given them, to tell them that the transfers must be torn up, the certificates carried home again, that there is no money for them—the whole thing is a swindle?"

He faced the possibility calmly, his pulse hardly moved. But he remembered a speech at the deputation and thought of the second it takes to pull a trigger. "After all, there is one great solution for all ills," he told himself, "death and the gravedigger between them give it to even the poorest devil at last."

In the twilight he went down to the sea. He had begun already to think out some plan of life worth a man's living. He knew that his desire to live any life at all was a make-believe, and yet he persevered. The happiest people in creation, it seemed to him, were the working poor, the most

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responsible—the working rich. But his strongest feeling concerning himself was, as he had said on an impulse to Joe and it had been growing on him since, that he ought to be shot. “But no, George Wendern,” he said, “that shall not be the end, and your food for thought is set out ready for you when you are in your shanty on Sandway Strip; may it be a sacrament to you.”

He choked as he said it, the curious inability to feel, the sense of being hypnotised, was drifting away, leaving one of desolation and misery. After all he was a mortal man; and there was only cold comfort in the possession of Katherine’s soul; he wanted her, her human love—herself, as a man wants the woman he adores. He clenched his teeth to bear silently and calmly what had happened to him. Blue skies and a ship, a shanty on the other side of the world, what did he care for any of them? He wanted the woman of his heart, the one woman of his life. He was baffled and cornered, taken, as he expressed it, by a sidewalk into hell, and for one moment in the darkness on the deserted beach he threw up his hands as Katherine had done in the library at Princes Gate when the door closed on her mother. “I can’t stand it,” he said, “nor do I see in any of the fine sentiments with which we hedge ourselves round a reason why I should, when I have discharged the obliga-

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tions which by sheer carelessness and foolery I have incurred. The shareholders will be safe soon, there'll be fragments to gather up, the end of the lawsuit will put a fortune into my hands. I must find a little wisdom to deal with it—and that is all."

Gradually the darkness gathered round him, the sound of the sea was in his ears, the wind swept past; he felt as if he were a madman keeping his madness well in hand so that no one would suspect. "My dear," he said to her in his thoughts, "I shall go on and love you as long as I live. But it must be as far off from you as possible, and may all that you get in exchange give you some sort of satisfaction. I have been a brute to you at odd moments during these last hours, but luckily you won't know or even guess it."

He turned his face towards the long road that led to the hotel and doggedly made himself think of practical things again. He wondered if Elworthy, the solicitor, when he made out the lists of assets would find that there was enough to do something for Mrs. Berwick. "However, I hope Joe will marry that lady," he thought. "If he does, he'll do me another good turn and he won't do himself a bad one, for there's a curious conscientiousness about the little woman that will prevent her from bringing disaster on any one

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with whom she has concern. I hope he is taking her to the Carlton this evening."

As a matter of fact they were at the Savoy, at one of the little tables by a window, and between the excellent courses that both of them enjoyed, as only those do who remember poor and scanty food, they looked out at the Embankment. The trees wore a vivid green in the softening light that comes before the greyness—and the tramcars moved along swiftly, silently almost, with their lamps already shining, making them seem like living monsters apologetic for desecrating the beautiful highway by the river. Joe was absent-minded, meditating on the news about Wendern of which Mrs. Berwick told him—that is, the part of it that related to Katherine Fiffer. For the rest, Wendern had sent him a hurried line telling him that he had an appointment at the Grosvenor Hotel with Christopher Lant late on Wednesday afternoon, that he should be back for it, and for the meeting next day; but he had not given any clue to his present whereabouts. The letter had been written at the office. He had felt that he wanted to get away even from the friend he liked best, and Joe, always queerly sympathetic, understood it.

"Well, a woman who can throw over a chap like

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Wendern for one like Derbyshire isn't worth a dead jackass," was his comment. "As for George, why, the Dock case will be finished soon, and there will be plenty of birds in the air for him; he'll bring 'em down too, you may be certain of that."

"You think it will be finished by Wednesday?"

"I expect so," he answered. There was a long pause, for many things were in Parker's mind before he said, "I'm afraid you won't see much of me between this and then. I've a good deal to do, and I've a sister at Yarmouth and it's about time I thought of going to see her."

"Oh," she made her tone regretful, though in reality she felt that his absence would be a relief. "I shall miss you."

"Well, if you take it that way I shall be satisfied. I shall be in on Wednesday, you may be certain of that, and I'll bring one or two little things to show you. I've been considering in my own mind what I'd do with them, and—" he took a gulp of champagne, "I've been considering about you too, Mrs. Berwick. I'd like you to know it, so that you can make up your mind what you'll do if I think it's wise to say what's in mine."

She dropped her eyes. "Oh, Mr. Parker, you are so droll."

"Well, I never heard it called droll before; but I'm glad it strikes you that way. Anyhow,

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I'll be in between six and seven on Wednesday and hear how things are going. I think I shall have something of my own to tell George too; you might say so if he comes first. Meanwhile, I'll call on Mrs. Fiffer before I go to Yarmouth and let her know what I think of that young woman."

"Mr. Wendern hasn't invited you to come in on Wednesday?" Mrs. Berwick asked discreetly.

"No, I don't know that he has, but that doesn't matter between old friends like us. I come when I like—and mean to go on with it."

"Of course," Mrs. Berwick answered softly; but she did not mention the party, for Wendern had said nothing about inviting him. It must be repeated that she was a tactful woman.

CHAPTER XX

THE tension of the days that followed was almost more than Mrs. Berwick could bear. There was no sign from Wendern; Joe Parker sent her a picture postcard from Yarmouth, on which he had written "With best wishes, from J. P.," but she heard nothing else from him.

With the Fifers she had no communication at all; there were particulars of the Kenton catastrophe in the papers, and paragraphs about Lord Derbyshire's accession to the title and his engagement to a great American heiress who would increase considerably his already immense income; and it was stated that the marriage would take place soon and quietly. Katherine used his newly acquired car once or twice; and her mother was to be seen whirling away in the Fiffer one. But visits between the two houses in Princes Gate had seemingly come to an end.

"They have forgotten; these people always forget," Mrs. Berwick thought a little bitterly as the days went by and no sign was made to her. "They take you up on a freak or an impulse because you amuse them, or can be of use to them,

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or because you come across their path and they are too polite not to be civil before you get out of it—but care! nobody who is rich cares for women who are poor and of no position; though occasionally they are kind—as a matter of moral duty. Oh, how I hate duty. I should like to escape into a big generous world where every one could be natural and no one was snubbed or envied, and one never had to be underhand in little things.” The last sentence betrayed that Mrs. Berwick had an outlook of her own, though it might have been warped or misshapen by circumstances.

The man in possession was still possessing and well content. The servants were appeased by the £400 suddenly spent in the household. They were really devoted to Wendern; he held them as if by a spell, and not even the proofs of financial embarrassment seriously disturbed their belief in his making things right for them. Mrs. Berwick herself had been immensely comforted by the £100 allotted to her, she had paid the water rate for Mrs. Rigg and given presents to the entire family, besides wiping out some bills of her own.

Monday came, Tuesday—Wednesday morning.

The supper was to be that night. She wondered at what time Wendern would return. The cables had ceased since he went away—she supposed that they had been sent on to him; but it made no dif-

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ference, for of their contents she had known little or nothing when he was at home. Every morning there was the excitement of reading the account of the Dock case in the paper; it had spread out a good deal, and she gathered that fresh complications had arisen. Still the crisis had been reached at last, the speeches made, and the verdict might be expected at any moment. It was not in the Wednesday morning paper, but it was bound to come that day; she reckoned up the difference of time, and felt that any moment might bring it. She was more feverishly anxious than Wendern himself, for his affairs had become a terrible anxiety to her; and her own future as well as his seemed to be hanging on the result of the trial. Thank Heaven, he would be back in a few hours; she was half hysterical again with nervousness and a sickening fear, for which she could not account; above all, with a mad longing to see him. She felt lonely, shackled, bewildered, all by turns, and only occasionally and in sheer desperation did she think of Joe Parker.

The morning dragged by while she sat in her usual place by the writing-table. The window leading out to the garden had been closed. She got up and opened it to let in the summer air. Then, for the first time since their engagement, she saw Katherine and Derbyshire together. She

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had not yet learnt to call him by his new title; besides, the funeral that gave him leave to use it had only taken place two days ago. They came out of the Fiffer house on to the lawn, and were evidently deep in conversation. She went out and walked up and down, slowly, in the soft shade on her side of the enclosure, carefully crossing their path, thinking they were certain to stop and speak to her; but they passed close by her twice, apparently without seeing her; then suddenly Katherine turned her head and asked, "When does Mr. Wendern come back?"

"This evening." Mrs. Berwick gathered her wits together and smiled, but the two people, interested in themselves, went on. They did not want her, they had ignored her, she told herself, as she went back to the morning-room; but she was used to not being wanted; she remembered that it had been difficult to find any one who thought her even worthy of her hire. Joe Parker was the one exception to the rule. He was coming between six and seven that afternoon, he had said so, and he was a rock to lean upon, a man who kept his word. For the first time she thought of him not only gratefully, but almost with affection.

"And if he asks me, I'll marry him," she told herself. He was good-natured and kind-hearted, and though she was not a bit in love with him, it

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would be such a blessed thing to escape from poverty for good and all, to get away from servitude, to be natural and—and—if she was to know peace of mind—she must go far away from George Wendern, she realised that it was the only way. “How women suffer,” she cried aloud without knowing it, “gagged and bound and helpless—how they suffer, and men never dream it, or care as little as they appear to know it—oh, what fools we are—what fools.” She put her hands to her head for a moment, then cooled her eyes with a soft handkerchief dipped into the water of a bowl of roses. In ten minutes she was herself again.

At last the afternoon.

She saw the flowers arrive in a waggon, stacks of them, tall trees and boxes of foliage to make a background for the band, which was to be put at the far end of the dining-room near the orange-trees, on a sort of dais away from the windows that led out to the garden and the lawn. When she went to see what was being done soon after four o’clock, Rogers and his people were busy with the table; it was being laid for twenty or more, she thought, but she had not intellect enough left to count the places. They stopped when she entered, as if they resented her coming. The servants never forgot, and she knew it, that Mrs. Berwick

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might be a lady, or think herself one, but she was paid to be there, just the same as they were, and between them there was always much civility, but also some veiled resentment, which occasionally expressed itself on their side in a little venturing familiarity.

"I came to see the flowers, they are really beautiful," she said loftily; she found loftiness a diplomatic attitude.

"They're not bad," Rogers answered condescendingly; "Mr. Wendern wants things done handsomely to-night." He went to the side-board and began to take the foil and wire off the corks of some extra bottles of champagne, leaving only the strings to be cut, before laying them down: they looked better with the foil on for the table. "This is the brand you're so fond of—extra dry," he said, and looked round with a smile; he had grown less respectful since it had struck him that she might be left unpaid with the rest, and find it as inconvenient as any of them.

"Continue your work, Rogers, and be good enough not to make any remarks."

"Certainly, ma'am."

She went up to the orange-trees and lingered, not choosing to be hurried away by the impatient glances of the servants, unlocked the door behind the trees and looked out at the green expanse be-

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yond. She could see the Fiffer windows on the right, half screened by the trees; a little journeying breeze wandered by and lifted the leaves on its way, so that she saw the white curtains of the room she knew to be Katherine's. She closed the door and went back towards the table that was a chaos at present with preparations for the night's festivity.

Suddenly, through the open door, she saw Wendern's kitbags being carried across the hall towards the stairs.

CHAPTER XXI

HE had come back!

She nearly cried out for joy and relief; she could scarcely hide her excitement. "Oh—" she went forward with a quickness that was promptly checked. On the threshold she found herself face to face with him. "Oh, Mr. Wendern, you have come! And you look much better—it has done you good? Did the motor meet you? I heard that it came from the makers this morning." A little resentment darted into her heart as she thought that perhaps Rogers had known the hour of his return, and she had been cheated of some anticipation.

"I am much better," Wendern answered with a grateful smile: he seemed pleased to see her. "I've been to the sea and rested; and—no, the motor didn't meet me; I came in a taxi. But I shall want it," he added, turning to Rogers; "I am going out again at five, or soon afterwards." He looked anxiously at the preparations for the feast, and seemed to have some plan in his head: she wondered what it might be. Hardly knowing what she did, she followed him to the morning-

George Wendern

room; it worried him, and she knew it,—he expected her to leave him alone after the morning. But it was no good—she had to follow him; she felt irresponsible, almost hypnotised. He waited for her to go, but she couldn't go, she wouldn't.

“Is there a telegram for me?” he asked impatiently and sent for Rogers.

“No, sir, none has come.”

There was a sound of the front door being noisily closed. “Perhaps that's it; go and see,” escaped Wendern's lips. Then she knew that his calmness, like her own, was assumed.

Rogers looked behind him. “It's Mr. Tillatt, sir, he always comes in that way.”

“Tillatt—who's he?”

“The man in possession, sir.”

“He gives himself dreadful airs,” Mrs. Berwick said, “and always goes in and out by the front door.”

“Never mind—he'll go into hell by the front door some day and never come out.” He turned to her when Rogers had gone and explained, “I thought a cable would have been here by this time.”

Then, not able to restrain herself, she burst out with, “Oh, I hope it will be all right. It will end to-day, I know—I saw it in the paper.”

He gave a little shrug, and went up to the writ-

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ing-table. She felt that she ought to leave him, but still something held her. "If it doesn't come soon," he said, as if speaking to himself rather than to her, "I shall be up a tree."

"Mr. Wendern," for she could bear it no longer, "you told me you were giving this supper-party to the shareholders of the Syndicate?"

"Quite right. I'm giving it to some of them."

"I heard—it—was not doing very well?"

"It's doing very badly. Financial paper to-day had a long article about it."

"Oh, but that's good, isn't it?" she asked and looked up sympathetic and with appealing eyes.

"Well, no," he answered with a cynical smile, "not very—it denounces it as a wild-cat scheme."

"Oh—"

"Perhaps because it wasn't bribed to say the reverse."

"I'm sure that's it."

"Well—you are a nice woman; but you know nothing about it. Personally, I think the paper is right."

"Oh—" she said again as if alarmed, though she was soothed at being called a nice woman, "but mayn't I know something about it before the rest do? Anything that concerns you—" She clasped her hands against her bosom.

A little apprehension came into his face again,

George Wendern

as if he feared another scene was coming. But a look at her face showed him that she had herself well under control. "The Syndicate is, as a matter of fact, doing very badly," he said and waited a moment. "The very little shareholders are safe, but some others, reckless beggars or fat, living in well-feathered nests, came in on the strength of my name. I've called them together, as well as some other unfortunate devils to whom I owe money—perhaps they'll get a cheque each. If the cable is good, I mean if the lawsuit is over, they will, if it is not—"

"If—if it is not?"

"Then I shall still be able to pay them off from another source—and to-night—before they leave the house—" He waited again, a queer look came into his eyes. "If anything should prevent that—why, it will be amusing to see them riotous with rage."

"Oh, Mr. Wendern, how can you risk it?"

"Don't be afraid. Besides, risks give life some of its best excitements; it would be dull without them. The riot will be short, if there is one at all. Have you seen anything of our friends over the way?" He nodded towards the garden.

"Miss Fiffer was walking up and down the garden with Lord Derbyshire—I mean Lord Kenton—this morning, but I only spoke to her for a mo-

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ment. They didn't look very happy," she added, for it had struck her curiously afterwards how unloverlike they had seemed. "I passed Mrs. Fiffer out driving this afternoon, and she looked very cross—she didn't see me——"

"Ah—I heard the door bell." He raised his head.

"How acute your hearing is, I didn't notice it."

"There are times when one can hear the rustle of an angel's wing in Paradise or the grin of a fiend in hell."

Rogers brought in a buff envelope. There was a slight convulsive movement of Wendern's fingers when he opened it, but he showed no sign as he read it, and she was not sure whether it was the cable or merely an ordinary telegram. "There is no answer," he said, and stared at it absently, then turned away with it in his hand.

For the life of her she couldn't ask if it was the verdict; besides he never allowed himself to be questioned. She waited silently with her still hands clasped, hoping he would speak; it seemed to her that the seconds, as they went by, lingered to hear, and the clock ticked more loudly than usual; but he said nothing. Again when she could bear it no longer a little sound came from her lips, it served to bring her back to his remembrance.

George Wendern

"Do you know anything about Joe Parker?" he asked. "Has he come back from Yarmouth?"

She tried to answer naturally. "Yes. He said he would come in between six and seven to-day—that he might have something to tell you."

Wendern looked at the clock. "I can't wait for him." He rang again and asked Rogers, "Is the motor at the door?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." He thrust the cable or telegram into his pocket and looked puzzled, as if trying to remember something, and seemed quite unconscious of Mrs. Berwick's anxiety. "If Joe comes, you must keep him till I return," he said in an absent voice, then recovering his self-possession he asked with the smile that always made her heart beat quicker, "I hope he took care of you while I was away?"

"Yes, yes, thank you," she said impatiently, what did anything matter to her except this—this—man's concerns.

"That's right," he nodded approvingly. "If I'm not back when he comes tell him I've gone to the Grosvenor Hotel to see Lant, and ask him to wait for me,"—he stopped abruptly and looked at his watch. "A quarter past five—plenty of time. I must see how the supper-table is going to look. Tell Joe about the party—but of course you did?"

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—say, I want him to come, I forgot to invite him.”

“Oh, I’m so glad—I didn’t tell him anything about it—I thought you might be angry—but I did so hope he would be here,” she had been quite embarrassed at the thought of his not coming.

Wendern went quickly back to the dining-room, and again she followed him; it was no good, she couldn’t help it; she noticed how tall he looked, perhaps because he wore the thin loose overcoat in which he had come up from Winchelsea.

“Rogers,” he said, “Mr. Parker will sit at the other end. See there is plenty of champagne, a bottle to every man, and put it on the table so that they can help themselves. Yes, that chair for Mr. Parker—that’s right, but closer to the trees—it’s a long table—they make a good background. I shall want pen and ink put near me,” he felt in his breast-pocket; Mrs. Berwick divined that he touched a cheque-book. He looked towards the clock. “Twenty minutes past five, I must go.”

He went out into the hall, and yet again she followed him. Some abject fear she didn’t stay to define impelled her. Suddenly he darted back to the morning-room. Craning her neck, she saw that he went towards the writing-table.

George Wendern

Her hearing was as acute as his own now. She heard the little jingle of some keys as he took them from his pocket, and the opening and shutting of a drawer—the bottom one on the right-hand side of the table. She recognised a little squeaking sound it made. When he returned she knew that he had put something into the side-pocket of his overcoat; a look of determination was on his face.

A spasm of wild terror passed through her, an awful thought possessed her. "Oh, Mr. Wendern," she said in an undertone, so that they might not hear her in the dining-room, "where are you going?" She clutched at his sleeve. "What are you going to do?"

He looked at her surprised, half amused in a sorry way, for he saw that she was distracted. "I don't know," he answered. "A rudderless ship sometimes goes where no steersman would have driven it." He took a step towards the door. As he opened it he looked back. His tone was kind, almost affectionate, and she realised it. "You'll see to everything, I know," he said; "you always do. By the way, that band hasn't been told what it is to play, has it? Find out what they can do, and turn on anything you think appropriate."

"It ought to be lively."

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“As you please,” he answered with a shrug. “The ‘Last Post,’ if you like.” She gave a little gasp, but before she could speak he added, “Mind you tell Joe he must be here to-night.” He took her hand. “And be good to him. He’s the best chap in the world, the best friend I ever had. Au revoir again.” In a moment he had gone, he had looked back at her with a smile and a triumphant look in his eyes.

She staggered to the morning-room and managed to open the window, for she couldn’t breathe; she was dazed and paralysed with terror. It seemed as if some other self than the one of which she was conscious knew and saw tragedy approaching, but had not yet withdrawn the veil that hid it from her actual eyes. If she had only known what the cable held,—if it was the cable,—but if it had been the verdict he would surely have told her. Besides, it would have been in the evening paper, which had come half an hour ago. She was certain it was not there—she snatched it up from the sofa and turned it over again, as she had done when it came, scanning it from end to end. No, not a word concerning the Dock case. There was some mystery she couldn’t fathom, some terrible crisis at hand. She felt that it had to do with Christopher Lant, and that on the interview between him and Wendern everything depended. A

George Wendern

score of suggestions came crowding into her brain—impossible meanings to every word he had spoken, impossible endings of the present situation, of ways out of the maze in which she seemed to be standing. If the Dock case went right—if the verdict came—if Wendern really had the money to pay off these shareholders who were coming to supper—For a moment it went through her that he was bluffing them. After all, fascinating men had been known to do terribly unexpected and shady things; suppose matters had gone so wrong with him that he meant to bolt and leave every one in the lurch? She hated herself for the moment's suspicion. George Wendern do so mean a thing! He wouldn't, he wouldn't—she knew it. He was like no one else in the world, and, oh! she loved him as she had never loved any one on earth. She would never own it or betray it, but her heart and soul knew it and would know it to all eternity. Moreover, she loved him so well that beyond all things she longed for his happiness, though she might never for a moment share it, except with the joy of an onlooker. It was a proof of how utterly beyond her reach she knew him to be that she could contemplate marriage, and even contentment, with Joe Parker; but she was so tired of steering her own life, she longed for dependence on a man—a strong, straight, clean-souled man

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who would take care of her and give her the shelter and safety of his strength. Then she felt it would be possible to live, even to be content, though romance and all the happy dreams that come of love and passion were for ever beyond her reach.

The clock chimed half past five. He was at the Grosvenor by this time, she wondered what he and Lant had to say to each other. She had rather liked Lant; a vulgar man and probably an imposter—for she had summed him up quickly, but with generous impulses, easy-going and full of compliments to women. Perhaps—

The telephone bell rang.

With a caution that was natural to her, she flew to the door and closed it, then back to the receiver.

“Mrs. Berwick?”

“Yes, I’m here.” It was George Wendern’s voice, there was an agitation in it that she felt, rather than heard.

“My dear lady,” he said, “will you be so very kind as to make yourself look charming—though you always do; and if I’m not back in time I want you to be in the drawing-room to receive the guests for me when they arrive at eleven o’clock.”

“Oh—I couldn’t—I should be afraid——”

“You will do it perfectly,” she imagined the

George Wendern

little smile with which he said it. "Talk to them, be as gracious as you always are, make any excuse you like for my absence, say that I've been away, that unexpected business has detained me, but I am hurrying back. At a quarter past eleven, if I have not arrived, bring them down to the dining-room, and do me the great kindness to have supper with us—"

"Have supper with you—" she gasped.

"If you will? I want you to sit at the head of the table. Tell them to alter my place to the other end, where Joe was to sit, then I can slip in through the conservatory—see that the door is unlocked, and I will take my place with my back to the orange-trees—at worst I shall be there before you are halfway through."

"Halfway through—" she echoed faintly.

"By that time you will have charmed them all."

"Oh, but must I come down to supper with them?"

He took no notice and went on. "Tell me you will be as kind as you always are and do what I ask?"

"Oh, Mr. Wendern," she sighed again, while a vision of herself in her soft grey satin dress with black velvet bows and paste buckles—and of a score of men admiring her, and no rival in the field—went through her.

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“Two of your friends will be there, Joe Parker and—Mr.—Mr. Bulson; put them on either side of you and make time if I am not there. You will do it?”

“Oh, if you wish——”

“I knew you would, you are always amiable, and you help me greatly by promising to do this. Before I make my ultimate communication to them, if—if it is necessary”—he laid a queer emphasis on the word, “I will make a sign and you shall escape,” a little sound that he had not intended her to hear came through as he put down the receiver; it sent another stab of terror through her. Something was going to happen, she knew it, but she had no clue to what it might be. She supposed him to be at the Grosvenor Hotel, but nothing had betrayed whether any one else was in the room when he telephoned, or where the message came from. She looked at the clock again—only five minutes since the bell rang—twenty-five since he had left the house, but she felt that a great deal had occurred in them. She threw herself on the sofa, and for a few minutes tried to make herself unconscious of everything about her, of everything that might happen; her nerves and brain needed rest from the tension of the last hour.

“If only Joe Parker would come,” she moaned presently; and dragging herself to the looking-

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glass stood critically examining her face. Haggard and old, with lines about the mouth and eyes—and what a difference it made when her hair was pushed back from her temples. Joe mustn't see her like this—and he would be here directly. She cooled her eyes with her hands and arranged her hair; she knew that the dark blue skirt and the dainty muslin blouse she wore were becoming, if she could rid her face of its careworn expression she could gather courage for the interview with him. Thank goodness he was coming to supper.

Then she remembered Wendern's instructions and went to the dining-room again. She managed to put on a haughty manner—or what she meant to be one—while she made the alterations he had indicated, and explained to the servants that Mr. Wendern had just telephoned them, and that if he were not back she would take his place at the table.

They were astounded. "Well, I never did," Rogers said when she had gone. "I shouldn't wonder if she plays first fiddle here: she will if we don't look out, or it looks very much like it."

CHAPTER XXII

A QUARTER of an hour later Joe Parker came. He was in high spirits, evidently full of a matter that he considered important, and delighted to see her.

“Good evening, marm,” he said. He always found it difficult to drop the “marm” at the beginning of an interview. “I’m glad to be here again. I’d have come earlier, but—” He stopped mysteriously. “I hope you got my post-card from Yarmouth?”

“Oh yes; and it’s so nice to see you, dear Mr. Parker.” She put out her hand, and tried not to wince at the strong grip he gave it.

“They tell me that George has been back and gone out again. But what’s all this fuss about out yonder?” He nodded in the direction of the hall. “They seem to be doing something pretty extensive in the way of table-laying; there are flowers enough to stock a market garden?”

He was looking with surprise at her face. It showed signs of the agitation she had been going through; perhaps that was why he still held her hand, for it was not the sort of thing Joe Parker

George Wendern

did. And it was Wendern's affairs, not Mrs. Berwick, that filled his thoughts at the moment.

"There's going to be a supper-party at eleven o'clock," she explained. "Mr. Wendern wants you to come to it. He told me to invite you."

"George always does something you wouldn't expect. I should have thought it was about the last day he would have cared for party-giving—but what's upsetting you? You don't look up to much; nothing happened—to George, I mean?"

"I'm not up to much—I'm so frightened and unhappy." She tried not to shiver with the dread that possessed her, and, for the life of her, she could not put it into words.

"Well, but don't take it as badly as that—buck up."

"I will."

"Look here," he went on, "there are a few loose diamonds in my pocket."

"Oh—" Her lips refused to articulate.

"You heard what I said, didn't you?"

"Yes, dear Mr. Parker, I heard—the diamonds?"

"And—well, I've not seen a woman I'd like better to have a bit of gold put round them for."

She struggled again to whip up her spirits, and managed to give a sickly smile. "I've not seen a man I'd like better to wear them for," she said.

Gave a Party

“Then that’s agreed.”

“Oh, but everything is going wrong—I’m so unhappy.”

“You’re getting nervous, that’s what it is,” he answered in his strong kindly voice. “I expect George is down on his luck. He’s had his cable, I suppose?”

“I don’t know. Something came. He didn’t tell me whether it was a telegram or the cable, and I was afraid to ask.”

“Well, the Dock case is finished, verdict against him, heavy costs.”

It took her by the throat. A cry escaped her. “Against him? Oh, no, no—are you sure?”

“It’s in the evening paper—you’d better look.” He went towards the one lying on the sofa.

“It’s not there. I looked all through it.”

“It’s an early edition,”—he threw it aside,—“you’ll find it in the next one; that’s where I saw it. No one reckoned it would go that way.”

“Oh, what will he do?” She broke down utterly and sobbed.

He liked her for it. “This is a nice woman,” he thought. “She’s got a heart, and keeps it in working order.”

“Oh, dear Mr. Wendern!” she wailed.

He watched her distress almost triumphantly. “Look here,” he said, “don’t you fret; it doesn’t matter—doesn’t matter a lost button.”

George Wendern

“But it does—it’s so cruel—you don’t know what he is.”

“I can make a good guess—guess even what he is to a woman.”

She dried her tears, but her brain whirled. “Oh, you don’t understand,” she said vehemently. “He meant to pay every one—people belonging to the Syndicate and all sorts of other people—now—to-night; they were to have supper here first, and then—that’s what this party means.”

“Well! George was always a maniac, but I never thought he would count his chickens before they were hatched in this fashion. How did he think he was going to get the money if he wasn’t sure of the Dock verdict, and that’s been going off the rails for him the last day or two?”

It seemed part of the cruelty of the hour that he should take it so easily. “I don’t know. There’s a man downstairs—a man in possession,” it had a frightening sound to her, but it only seemed to amuse him.

“Hi!—George is going the whole way along while he’s about it.”

“But if things are wrong with the Syndicate and the Dock verdict is against him, he must be ruined.”

“Yes, George is about ruined, I can tell you. Where has he gone, do you happen to know?”

“To the Grosvenor Hotel to meet some one.”

Gave a Party

"Of course, I ought to have remembered, but I've been taken up with something just as exciting as George's business."

"He said he had an appointment with Mr. Lant—he told me to tell you so."

"Why, yes, he wrote about it—told me himself, but I'd forgotten. Well, he won't find Lant. Lant took a train for Southampton as soon as he heard the Derryford verdict."

"But there's a meeting of the Syndicate tomorrow, I saw one of the notices lying about."

"Lant won't be there. He's given it the slip and means George to have it out with them alone."

"Oh, it's too much, it's too much," she wrung her hands.

"Look here, Mrs. Berwick, I tell you again not to worry so, it's just waste of good living time."

"But all sorts of people are coming to this mad party—coming to be paid, they expect it, he told me so; it is why he asked them." Then the meaning of the terror that had possessed her betrayed itself. "He means, if everything goes wrong, to kill himself—perhaps he has already—I know it—I know it well, for he took something from that drawer,—his pistols were in there. He meant to kill Lant if things went wrong, but if Lant has gone, he'll—" she couldn't put it into words again.

"Well?"

George Wendern

"Oh, don't you understand," she cried, maddened and terrified, "he means to shoot himself."

"Not he. George is made of finer stuff than that."

"I can't think why he wants me to receive the guests and bring them down if he is not back."

She told him of the telephone message.

"When did he start?"

"Three-quarters of an hour before you came."

"Has he got the motor out?"

"Yes—he went in it."

"Wouldn't take him more than ten minutes to get there," Parker said thoughtfully. "He ought to be back here again. It's that telephone business I don't understand. What the mischief is he after?"

"Hark—" she said suddenly, "I thought I heard him."

Parker went to the hall, opened the front door, and looked out. He came back shaking his head. "He's not there. Look here, I think I'd better go after him, I'll track him, trust me. Perhaps he's gone to his club. Anyhow, you may be sure of one thing, Mrs. Berwick, I'll bring him back safe and sound." But his face had grown long and anxious. "I believe I'd give my life for George," he added.

"And I would."

Gave a Party

“Then there are two of us who’d do it.”

“You do love him,” she said with a spasm of relief at something being done. “I can feel that.”

“Why, yes, there isn’t any doubt about it.”

“And I don’t wonder, he’s so good.”

“He’s good enough—a flick of the devil in him too, and he’s all the better for it.”

“Every one is. I wouldn’t be wholly good myself for all the world.”

“Well, you don’t look it.”

“Oh—” she gave a sorry little laugh as she walked with him to the door.

“But I shouldn’t mind taking you further?” He stopped and put his hand on her shoulder with heavy affection.

“I shouldn’t mind going. Find George Wendersn, save him—bring him back, and I’ll do anything in the world for you.”

“That’s agreed—eh?”

“Yes, yes—” she was hurrying him away.

“I’ll do it,” he repeated; he was in the hall, on the door-step now; “you’ll see—and look here, you shall give me a kiss if I do,” he turned away sheepishly, he was unaccustomed to love-making. “But I wonder what the mischief he’s after?” he added anxiously to himself as he left the house and hailed a taxi.

She sat down again with her hands clasped and

George Wendern

listened—listened. It wasn't possible to hear things passing the front of the house, but the room door was open, and a hoot or some extra sound from a motor might penetrate to ears as keen as hers were now; and from one side of the room the whole length of the hall, could be seen.

“Oh, if he would come, if he would come!”

But there was no sign. Gradually she grew calmer; Parker's visit and his attitude towards Wendern had done her good. If he found him all would be well.

“There's nothing to be gained by worrying,” she said at last, “and if I have to receive these men I must pull myself together.”

She looked in at the dining-room once more. They were busy removing the little platform that had been erected for the band. Rogers explained that the leader had been, and said that the music would be too loud; it had better be put on the landing half-way towards the drawing-room, where a space projected roofed in with glass. There were palms, low much-cushioned seats, and brass hanging-lamps there that gave it a picturesque but cheap Eastern suggestion.

“Yes, I think it will be much better,” she said, and stood for a little time aimlessly watching the change being effected.

Eight o'clock struck. “You'll want your din-

Gave a Party

ner, ma'am, even if you are coming in to supper. It will be ready, I expect." She hated the familiar tone of the servants.

"I don't want any. Or ask them to send just a little soup to my room, and to tell me immediately if Mr. Wendern returns." She went slowly upstairs.

"Looks a bit chippy," Rogers remarked; "daresay she feels like the rest of us. I must say I'm a good deal interested in this game myself, for I don't see how it's being played or what he's up to. But, I mean to stand by him—well, as long as it's possible."

Mrs. Berwick was utterly exhausted, and gulped the soup down gratefully. Then she dressed. She looked pale, but pallor was becoming to her, and the fright and excitement in her eyes made them bright and attractive. The satin dress fitted her slim figure perfectly, and a velvet fillet round her head threw up the fairness of her hair; she drew a thin lace scarf over her shoulders, and fastened it with a glittering star—the lace was softening and modest-looking, she thought.

Nine o'clock. She was quite ready. It was nearly dark, the summer night was beginning. She looked out of the window—her room was a front one on the third floor, and could see up and down the main road. Scores of motors whizzed

George Wendern

by, their lights flashing, but none stopped before the house, though several turned into the private road that runs in front of Princes Gate.

“Oh, where can he be?” she cried; but again a belief in Parker finding him, and making things right, reassured her; and she thought, not without some gleam of pleasurable excitement, of the supper-party and the manner in which she would receive the guests if it fell to her to do it.

But time sped on; no motor stopped before the house. Then the door of the room behind her—as she still craned her neck out of window—was opened, she started and turned quickly. It went through her that although she had not heard it, nor seen any boy approach, a telegram might have come with news, or the telephone brought it. “Oh, what is it?” she breathlessly asked the maid who entered.

“Miss Fiffer says could you possibly see her?”

“Miss Fiffer!” What could Katherine want at this time of night? “Where is she?”

“In the morning-room; she asked if she might go there.”

Mrs. Berwick went down to her. The window was still open as she had left it; the grey shadows seemed to come trooping in—softly and very swiftly. A small silk-shaded lamp on the writing-table had been switched on, but there was no

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other light. Katherine, tall and slight, was standing half-way between the door and the window. She wore a long black chiffon cloak, it looked like a dark cloud fallen from the sky and wrapping her round. The evening dress beneath it was evidently dark too, but there were some pearls round her neck and in her bosom a cluster of small white flowers—the cloak opened and showed them. She went forward as Mrs. Berwick entered, and looked with surprise at the grey satin and the velvet bows with the gleaming paste buckles. “Oh, do you mind my coming—do forgive me,” she said. “I felt I must see you, but I will not keep you a minute. You are going somewhere?”

“No. Mr. Wendern is out—”

“I know. That’s why I came. It is you that I wanted to see. He passed me near Victoria this evening—about half-past five, I think. His face looked stern and very worried; he turned it away and didn’t see me, he seemed to be coming from the hotel—not from the station. I came back and went over to the Park and sat there. I should have come sooner and asked for you, but I saw Mr. Parker come and go. I went in—I had to, for dinner, or mother would have worried—but I knew Mr. Wendern hadn’t come back, and I couldn’t bear it any longer.” She took Mrs. Berwick’s hands and drew her down to the sofa.

George Wendern

“I want you to tell me about him, his face frightened me, he looked so miserable.” She said it almost in a whisper, her voice trembled with excitement.

“He is—he’s heartbroken.”

“Because he has lost his lawsuit?”

“Because—because of everything,” Mrs. Berwick answered, hating the woman who had been false to him, “he is ruined——”

“That’s why I came”—she held on to the back of the sofa with one hand and put the other to her throat—“we heard it an hour ago.” She stopped for a moment and threw her head a little way back. Her face looked very beautiful, but drawn and white as if she had been going through some suppressed torture of which she refused to speak. Mrs. Berwick saw it and it hardened her.

“Why should you care?” she asked coldly. “You are not going to marry him. You don’t love him.”

“I do, I do—why should I hide it now, or pretend.” She leant forward and took Mrs. Berwick’s hands. “We are two women, together and alone—oh, the comfort of speaking out.”

“But you are going to marry Lord Kenton.”

“No—no, I’m not.”

“Do you mean he has broken it off?”

“I broke it off.”

Gave a Party

“You!—but he’s a marquis now, he has £100,000 a-year.”

“I know—that’s why.”

“That’s why?” Mrs. Berwick could not believe her ears.

“My money isn’t necessary to him any longer—why should I marry him?”

“You didn’t love him?”

Katherine’s voice was soft and full of passion as she answered, “No, I never loved him—never for a single moment. I love George Wendern, and no one else in the world. When Lord Derbyshire came into the title and heaps of money from his uncle, I told him there was no longer any need for me to marry him; that I had only taken him because I wanted my fortune to be of use in the world. He was away at the funeral, but I wrote to him, and we had it out this morning, walking up and down the garden. You saw us? I told him there was only one man I loved, and I was breaking my heart for him—longing for him—dying for him. Oh, is it too late—do you think it’s too late?”

“How could you refuse him?” Mrs. Berwick was wonderstruck.

“He knows—George Wendern knows—he was very angry, but he knows why I did it—and he’s everything in this wide world to me, I love him—you can’t dream how much I love him.”

George Wendern

“I can,” came the quick answer, “everyone does, I do——”

“You?” Katherine exclaimed, and looked at Mrs. Berwick, at the beautiful dress and sparkling ornaments, while some fright stole over her face, as if she thought there was a meaning to this elaborate finery. “You love him—does he know it?”

“No, and he never will. I tell you, so that you may trust me. I’m going to marry his friend, Joe Parker, but there’s no one in the world like Mr. Wendern. Oh, if he would come back safely——”

“Safely?” Katherine echoed, taking alarm from the tone. “What do you mean? He looked like a man who was going to do something desperate.”

“He is. I know it. He said he was a rudderless ship,” Mrs. Berwick answered, “for he has lost everything in the world—he went to the Grosvenor Hotel to meet some one who has played him false—there too. Joe Parker went after him——”

“But what does this mean?” Katherine asked, touching the grey satin. “And all the flowers in the hall and on the stairs, the place looks as if he were giving a party?”

“He is—to the people to whom he owes money; he has invited them to come with some mad idea that he would be able to pay them. But he can’t now.”

“But he can. I want to lay all I have at his

Gave a Party

feet, perhaps he will walk over it—to me,” Katherine said humbly.

“He wouldn’t take it. He wouldn’t touch a penny of it,” the voice was full of cruel bitterness. “You don’t understand him as I do. If you had loved him enough he might have been saved, he would have lived for you; but you’ve killed him—killed the man you love—” she stopped, for the fright of an hour ago took possession of her—as if to add to it the clock struck ten. And still no Wendern.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know—I can’t tell you. Joe Parker may bring him back, or he may be too late—” she drew away from Katherine shuddering. “He seemed to think he would find him, but—”

“But?” the lips had grown white.

“He may be dead—dead already—and if he isn’t he means to kill himself—I know it.”

“What can we do?” She was half paralysed with terror.

Mrs. Berwick considered for a few desperate moments. “I have an idea—in case he does come back—write to him, a single line will do; say you love him; say anything you can that will make him want to live. Tell him you have broken with Lord Kenton—we’ll put it on his place at the supper-table. If he comes he’ll find it.” She remembered his last words at the telephone, there was

George Wendern

some mystery in them, some threat of tragedy, this change in Katherine might avert.

“If?—why do you go on repeating that word?” Katherine exclaimed, infected, maddened by the dread in the other’s voice. “I don’t believe he would invite all these people and let them come for you to face if he didn’t mean to come—he will come.”

“You are splendid, you are like Joe Parker, he said it too—that George Wendern was made of finer stuff.” She held out her hand.

Katherine took it as a beginning of the forgiveness for which she hungered. “Let me wait with you—he may come—he may be on the way—if I could see him—” she said humbly, yet with the proud set back of her head that Wendern had loved.

“Oh, if you could,” Mrs. Berwick echoed.

They sat together, looking at the clock, silent, listening, but as the minutes went on, with no sign of his returning, the fright and sickness at their hearts became too terrible for words. They rose and looked at each other and stood irresolute. “Come and write,” Mrs. Berwick said at last.

Katherine went to the table and, kneeling by it, wrote on the sheet of paper put before her—

Is it too late?—I love you—I love you, and I want you. Forgive me, and take me to the shanty on the other side of the world.

YOUR KATHERINE.

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She folded it and put it in an envelope. "I'll put 'K' in the corner," she said as she directed it. "It may catch his eye—and these," she took the white flowers from her bosom and kissed them, "put them with it."

Mrs. Berwick took her hand. "Come. You shall see."

They went to the supper-room; the servants had finished, only a single electric lamp was switched on. The long table was gorgeously laid, the room a mass of flowers. A forest of trees, orange-trees chiefly, at the back, behind the chair where George Wendern was to sit; through them was a little pathway to the door that led out on to the lawn. "He said he would come in that way," Mrs. Berwick explained. "I suppose he thought it would be better than walking the whole length of the room."

But Katherine divined the reason. If this supper was to be the end of all things, he wanted to take a last look at the lawn they had so often walked up and down—at the sycamore-tree they had lingered beneath in the happy days of the early summer. "He knows I love him," she thought. "Perhaps he felt it would give him courage to look up at our windows before he faced these people, or—" she remembered that he had told her how the lights in them had seemed to look towards him at night with friendly eyes.

George Wendern

Mrs. Berwick reached down a little bronze stand, a couple of inches high; it was on a shelf near the fireplace. "We will put the note on it," she said, "and the blossoms with it by his plate."

"If I watch," Katherine said, "I shall see him enter; even if it is very dark I shall make out his figure. Oh! shall I ever hear him speak to me again—or be forgiven?"

Then a thought struck Mrs. Berwick—"You might waylay him?"

But at that the girl's pride stepped in. "No, I couldn't," she answered, "he must have my note first, and if it is too late it must be so. But, oh! if I could get some sign to-night——"

"Watch from your window; you will be able to see the dining-room darkened again when the supper is over?"

"Yes."

"Then go down to your garden and stand by the little gate. If all is well I'll send him to you."

"But if not? If he is hard and tears up the letter, you won't let him know that I am there—waiting?"

"I will come to you, I can easily—and unless he wants to come, he shall never know."

Still Katherine hesitated. "Promise," she said, "not to tell him if—he is cruel."

Gave a Party

“I swear he shall never know.”

“But—if he won’t—you—you will come—and tell me?”

“I will come.”

Then Katherine took Mrs. Berwick’s hand and hesitated. Her heart was too full of weariness and dread and misery to feel more than relieved and grateful, and she had never been quite sure that she liked Mrs. Berwick. Now in this crisis she could only think of the man she loved and had probably lost, but, with something akin to self-reproach, she stooped and kissed the woman who seemed like a spar thrown from the wreck.

“You’ve been very good to me,” she said. “I’ll remember it all my life.” She drew the black cloud-like wrap close about her and hurried away; it seemed as if darkness followed her.

CHAPTER XXIII

ELEVEN o'clock. George Wendern had not come. Mrs. Berwick was in the drawing-room receiving the guests. A strange motley crew —city speculators, the expectant shareholders, fat men and thin, Lazarus the Jew, Mr. Bulson looking very gentlemanlike; Digby, truculent still but curious and interested; and in the midst Sir John Carneford, evidently embarrassed at being where he was, and like the rest astounded at finding no host, only a dainty-looking hostess in grey satin, apologetic and very anxious to propitiate them.

“Think I understand you’re not Mrs. Wendern?” a lean man inquired.

“No, I’m Mrs. Berwick,” she said with what she hoped was an easy but haughty smile, “a great friend of Mr. Wendern’s.”

“No doubt, a very great friend,” whispered a City man, who took himself to be humourous and fascinating.

They talked a little to each other, not very easily, and stared round almost suspiciously at the handsome room.

George Wendern Gave a Party

At a quarter past eleven Rogers threw open the double doors of the drawing-room and announced supper.

“Do you mean to say we are to begin without him?” Digby asked, eager for the feast but ready to bark on principle.

“He will be here directly,” Mrs. Berwick answered; she hesitated and waved her grey fan to and fro, wondering what the procedure should be.

Sir John Carneford stepped forward, “Pray allow me,” he offered her his arm, “Dear me, music too,” he said as they passed the band which had just installed itself on the landing, “Wendern is treating us very handsomely.”

The others followed sheepishly, “I suppose he means to come?” They whispered and hesitated at the door speaking about the article in the financial paper; only two of them appeared to have seen it, but the others were told of it.

“I’m sure your place should be next to Mr. Wendern,” Mrs. Berwick said with one of her tactful smiles as they entered the supper-room, regretting that Sir John was not to sit by her. “His very great friend Mr. Parker will be here directly,” she wondered how much longer her voice would hold out. “He is to sit by me.”

The band played softly the waltz from *Faust*.

George Wendern

Mrs. Berwick had chosen it; she loved Faust. The guests sat down slowly. The scene appeared to hypnotise them. There were shaded lights on the table, but the decorations were so low that she could see plainly Wendern's place at the other end, and the little note on the bronze stand with the blossoms beside it. The orange-trees beyond and the palms almost suggested a tropical forest with the night upon them, for they were dark and the effect was not spoilt by lights among them, only the yellow of an orange showed here and there and high up near the top of the trees patches of deep grey sky glinted through, a half mysterious background to the flaunting gorgeous feast.

The men looked at the dishes curiously, ate, and were silent at first, but they evidently thought it the right thing to make occasional remarks to Mrs. Berwick. As the wine went to their heads, they treated her with less deference and more friendliness, presently one or two of them even ventured a joke that was at least in doubtful taste. Luckily Mr. Bulson's attentions were a sort of safety valve, and the satin dress and the air of aloofness with which she waved the feather fan kept the men in order.

“Handsome room,” one of them said to his neighbour when they began to be more at ease.

“Very,” the speaker was the lean man, he

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looked like a money lender; "pictures must have run into a good bit of money."

"May have picked them up?" another suggested. And the supper went on.

"Very rum move getting us here to-night," a little man near the other end remarked, addressing himself to Sir John Carneford.

"Most extraordinary," the grave cultured tone had a certain effect on the assembly. "In fact I'm wholly at a loss to understand it."

"Australian manners, perhaps."

"Well, it's to be hoped he hasn't taken a trip back there?" came from far down the table.

"What's your opinion, ma'am?"

"He will join us directly," Mrs. Berwick answered haughtily.

"Meanwhile he has given us a splendid supper."

"And excellent champagne," put in Mr. Bulson, "of which I flatter myself I'm a judge."

Still no sign of Wendern. Mrs. Berwick was growing sick with fear. She wondered how many more dishes there were to come, to fill the terrible moments.

"I think I know that thing they're playing," a man said to her presently, when after a pause the band had struck up again. "I've heard my wife play it at home, do you happen to know what it is?"

George Wendern

“It’s The Steersman’s Song from ‘The Flying Dutchman,’ ” she answered coldly, and in her ears rang the words, “a rudderless ship, a rudderless ship.” She had marked it with a sort of desperation when she looked over the programme the leader of the band suggested.

Sir John was losing his patience, “It is really a most extraordinary proceeding of Mr. Wendern’s, inviting us to supper and then not being here to receive us,” he repeated.

The champagne in the bottle near the man opposite was getting low, and he answered thickly, “Handsome lady to do it, what more do you want? I vote that we drink her health.”

“Well, I won’t refuse to do that, for I shouldn’t think she felt very easy,” Digby said with a disagreeable smile. He sat near the middle of the table.

“Oh, please not, please not,” she entreated, “Mr. Wendern will be here directly, you must drink his.”

“We’ll see him first and ask what he thinks of the article in the paper this morning.”

“Of course it would have been a very different one if he had bribed them.” Mrs. Berwick remembered Wendern’s remark; she always picked up a hint quickly.

Mr. Bulson leant forward, he, too, was growing

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more familiar, "Did Wendern give you that diamond star?" he whispered.

"It was a gift from my husband," she looked grave, as became an awakened memory.

"That chap down there is a diamond merchant, he'll tell you what it's worth to a shilling."

"Oh, I don't want it valued." It had cost a guinea in Regent Street: she pulled the lace scarf nervously over it.

"Well, I don't care whether the South African markets are upset by rubber or not," Digby was heard saying a few minutes later. "What I want to know is, are we going to get our money back tonight? Or what's to be the upshot of getting us here in this manner—I believe we're all in the same boat?"

"We've signed transfers, but we haven't got our money."

"And it strikes me we shan't."

"Perhaps this supper is thrown to us as a sop."

"If he's playing tricks I'll be down on him, he shan't gag me with his stuff," Digby thumped his fist on the table and took another helping of mayonnaise.

"Quite right, serve him right if we smash up his place."

"Hush, remember the lady," Mr. Bulson said in a horrified voice.

George Wendern

“Perhaps if the truth’s known she’s no better off than we’re likely to be.”

“Oh, but I am—I am,” Mrs. Berwick hardly knew what she was saying. “Please don’t be so agitated, gentlemen—” she was listening still to the strains of “The Flying Dutchman,” rising and falling above the din of the table.

“If he’s fooling us, by God—” a bull-necked man began.

“No, no,” she said, raising her voice so as to be heard, “you’ll be satisfied, all of you, before you leave the table.”

But she realised that the supper was more than halfway through.

“Well, I hope we shall.”

“I doubt it,” another thick voice said.

“So do I—and I should like to know where he is?”

“I shouldn’t be surprised if an express train to-night and a ship to-morrow is the answer.”

A cry of satisfaction came from Mrs. Berwick’s lips. Joe Parker entered, and stood for a moment hesitating near the door. “Here is one of Mr. Wendern’s oldest friends—from Australia,” she cried. “Perhaps he has brought him?” but her heart sank when she saw that he was alone.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he said, trying to put a good face on things. “I hope you’ve left some supper for me?”

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“A little late, like the host,” one of them remarked.

“Did you find him?” she asked in a low voice as he moved to the place on her right.

He answered her back gloomily, “No.”

Quite suddenly her self-control gave way and a cry escaped her, “He’s dead, he’s dead, I know it, he has killed himself, or he has been killed in a motor smash,” she cried.

The faces turned towards her aghast, and for a moment there was a dead silence, save for the band on the stairs which seemed to be louder and more distinct; the servants stood still, petrified and scared, the man in possession looked through the crack of the open door. Then Joe Parker’s voice was heard, strong and firm, as he stood up to speak, “George Wendern is not dead, and he’s not staying away if he can help it, I’m certain of that, he’s not the sort; and if he’d been smashed up in the motor I should have heard of it—with what I’ve been doing.” He sat down to his supper and let them talk.

“Is this a plant, then?”

“That’s it—you bet.”

“Rather neat, I call it,” came through a squeaky laugh.

“A trick——”

“While he gets quietly off.”

George Wendern

“And I believe you are in it,” the bull-necked man shook his fist at Mrs. Berwick.

“Part of his game,” another voice said.

“You may always lay odds on a woman knowing.”

A tide was setting in against her. Parker sprang to his feet again and turned upon them with the look of a man whose fists might be dangerous, “You slow down, every one of you,” he said, “or I’ll make you.”

“Where’s Wendern?”

“Yes, where’s Wendern?”

“Has he levanted?”

“And what does this affair mean?”

Digby dashed his empty glass to the ground, “The whole thing is a put-up job,” he shouted. “Look here, gentlemen, I’m going to speak.”

They had risen to their feet, their faces were turned indignantly towards Mrs. Berwick and Parker. The only calm man among them was Sir John Carneford. They were in no mood to listen to Digby, each man wanted to be heard above the rest.

“Where’s Wendern?”

“Where’s Wendern?” they shouted.

“Oh, we would give the whole world to know,”

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Mrs. Berwick gasped, and shivered as the broken glass was gathered up.

“Ay, that we would,” Parker said under his breath, but it was heard.

“You two know well enough.”

“And so will we before we move from this table,” the thick voice put in.

“We’ll break everything before we go,” Digby shouted, and threw down another glass. “He shan’t fool us for nothing.”

Quite unnoticed Wendern came through the orange-trees at the back. He looked calm and collected, his head was erect, his shoulders well put back, a curious light in his eyes. He stood at the place laid for him, looking at the rowdy, blatant set of men he had gathered together; then he sent a little confident smile across the flowers to Mrs. Berwick; but she was too frightened to take her eyes away from the excited crowd of angry faces.

Parker, the only one who had seen him, raised his hand and said, “Well, if you want George Wendern, he is there.”

The noise ceased abruptly, the faces turned to the end of the table at which he stood, waiting for their recognition.

A cry of joy that ended in an agonized hysterical laugh, came from Mrs. Berwick.

George Wendern

The rest looked at him in bewildered silence.

“I am late, gentlemen, but Mrs. Berwick I know has done the honours for me. I have motored a great many miles in the last six hours in your interests, and should have been back in time to receive you but for the indiscretion of a tyre. I apologise for my absence.”

They recovered a little from their surprise. “I should think so, inviting us to supper and not being here,” came an angry growl.

“A most extraordinary proceeding,” Sir John said severely.

“What does it mean?” Digby asked.

“What about our shares?”

“We want to know about this Syndicate?” the man next Joe Parker said.

“Yes, and at once. We hear it’s a wild-cat scheme——”

“Nothing else.”

Wendern looked from one to the other till the tumult had somewhat subsided.

“Sit down, gentlemen,” he said, and they obeyed him. He remained standing himself, he raised his head a little higher while he spoke, calmly but defiantly. “You shall know about the Syndicate. It is worthless, and a swindle——”

They sprang from their chairs with rage, they seemed about to go forward and seize him. He

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put up his hands as if to hold them back, and said sternly, "Be quiet! Your money is lost—so is mine."

"What's that to us, we want ours."

"You knew it was a swindle all along," Digby shouted.

"I knew it a week ago, when Lant arrived in England; not before."

There were groans and sounds of derision.

Wendern went on. "Lant told me then that the money subscribed was spent, and he had come to England with a reconstruction scheme to get more. I refused to hear of this at first. Then I consented not to oppose it on condition that he paid off the little shareholders—some of them had staked all they possessed. They had their money back yesterday; they have learnt a lesson and are safe."

They were subdued now, waiting for what was to come.

"But what about us?" one of them asked.

"You all came into the Syndicate as a speculation, but on the strength of my name; that is why I have called you together. The rest—those other shareholders who remain unpaid, and who are not here, came in through Christopher Lant, let them settle their accounts with him. For your shares you have executed transfers. I presume you have them with you?"

George Wendern

There were sounds of assent.

“I wanted to take them up and send you away to-night with the money in your pockets——”

“Are you going to do it?”

“—that is why I invited you all, a party of a sort I expect that has never been given before; it was a queer fancy of mine.” He looked at them curiously, they seemed almost to amuse him.

“Are we going to have the money?” Digby asked in a bullying tone.

Wendern took no notice, and went on. “A lawsuit in which I had two hundred thousand pounds at stake was about to be decided——”

There were sounds of coming disappointment.

“That is why I called you together, with the Derryford Dock suit——”

“It went against you—it is in the evening paper——”

“Yes, gentlemen, it went against me. Lant promised that if it had not been decided, or if it had and went against me, he would lend me enough to pay off your shares. I was to see him at the Grosvenor Hotel this evening. That is why I was not here to meet you——”

“Mr. Lant’s quite right—he’s a gentleman——”

“Has he done it?” a tall man inquired, standing up to put his question.

“No! Perhaps he saw the evening paper too.

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He is on board his yacht, out in the open sea by this time, and has left me to face the music."

Parker, who had risen to his feet and stood looking at his friend in amazement, broke in with—"Look here, George, I've something to say—"

"You be quiet," barked a man near him.

Sir John held up his hand. "Gentlemen," he said, struck by Wendern's manner, "I feel sure that our host has something to add, let us listen to him."

Wendern looked round at the strange throng and went on with a little smile in his eyes. "Before I went, I made up my mind if Lant played us false to pay the penalty—"

"Penalty?" a voice cried, and all the faces were curious.

"Last week one of the shareholders—Mr. Digby, I think—said that directors of fraudulent concerns ought to suffer capital punishment. I entirely agreed with him, and promised that he should come to my execution."

"Oh! dear Mr. Wendern," Mrs. Berwick cried; "not now!—the letter—and flowers!" for Wendern had not yet noticed them, and she had tried in vain to make a sign.

"George, let me speak—" Parker insisted.

But Wendern took no notice. "If Lant had kept his word you would have found me ready to

George Wendern

hand you your money, if he broke it I determined you should see a dead man," he put his hand in his pocket; a cry came from Mrs. Berwick's lips again. He seemed suddenly to remember her presence with dismay, and leaning forward and speaking down the table between the two rows of men, he said in a kindly tone to Parker, "Joe, she oughtn't to be here, take her away."

"Oh no," she cried, "let me stay, do let me stay—and oh, do look at the letter and flowers by your place." He looked down at them absently without touching them or taking in that they were for him.

"She is all right," Parker called back, "and I want to speak—"

But Wendern waved him to silence again and went on. "Lant had started for Southampton half an hour before I went to keep our appointment. I calculated the distance there and back—I had a swift motor and fled after him—you begin to see why I was late? When I reached Southampton he was on board his yacht, already out of sight—let him go—" he stopped for a moment and his tone changed. "On the road back a tyre gave way, as I told you, or I should have been here an hour ago. It was made right, and on the last few miles I thought out things once more, and felt that the alternative I had imagined would be an easy way

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out for me, but a coward's way—a bit of cheap melodrama to which this supper had been a garish prelude. The grey sky was full of stars, and as I whirled under them along a road with tall trees on either side, like giants reproaching me, I thought of my home, thousands of miles away in Australia. The great distances seemed to be calling me, to be sending me messages and saying—but it is no good telling you—you would think it sentiment or bombast. What I want to say is this—” and again his voice changed,—“I am strong, I can fight the world, and have its best endowment—health and experience. Every one of you can afford to lose your money, or to wait. You shall not lose, if you will wait?”

Gradually stillness had come over the room, except for Wendern's voice; the faces of the men were turned towards him in wonder; but at his last words there was a sound of almost involuntary impatience. Parker, who all the time had been struggling to speak in vain, managed to put in—“George, they needn't wait, let me have a word?”

“Be quiet, Joe,” Wendern said, and looked at his guests again. “You are responsible men, and should take your luck for good or ill. Wait! Your money shall come back to you with interest.”

George Wendern

But the spell had been broken by the pause; there were sounds of derision and incredulity.

Digby's voice was heard growling, "I'm not going to wait for one—and the others shan't, if I know it."

And Mrs. Berwick, saying under her breath, "Dear Mr. Wendern, it's so like you."

Then Sir John Carneford rose to his feet, "Gentlemen," he said, "Mr. Wendern is doing a most extraordinary thing, and one he feels and intends to be Quixotic. You all of you know, as well as I do, that directors, as a rule, do not even dream of paying back money that shareholders lose. He has no legal responsibility; he could have gone away and left us in the lurch, or proposed the reconstruction scheme and let us in for more money. He has himself lost ten times as much as we have, but it is only our comparatively trivial losses that appear to trouble him. I fear we have been unfortunate under his guidance, but I feel, nay, more, would stake my life, that he is an honourable man. Let us do as he says, make the best of a bad business, as he is doing, trust him and wait."

Then Parker, whose excitement was carrying him away, at last got his chance, "You needn't wait," he turned to the men who had risen to their feet, "you shan't wait, and you shan't

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have any interest," he shouted to them, and then he turned to Wendern. "George, you wouldn't let me speak—but you can pay every one of them—pay them this minute. Look here—you're not the only man who gets cables. I've been getting them for weeks, and yesterday, and all day long, two to-night—and it's cost me a pretty bit answering them, I can tell you." He pulled the forms from his pocket and waved them in the air, "Sandway Strip has done the business—you'll get your cheques to-night, and then you may go home and sleep soundly in your beds and wish you'd behaved better."

They yelled from sheer excitement, "Get it——"
"Hurrah!"

"I say, give three cheers," came a drunken voice.
"This is a rum turn," was heard above the din.
But Wendern was as cool as a cucumber,
"What do you mean, Joe," he asked.

Parker, standing at the corner by Mrs. Berwick, looked at the shareholders with dry triumph. "He owned a big property once in Australia, and got rid of it," he told them, "but he kept Sandway Strip, the worst bit of all—just out of sentiment—and it's my belief, gentlemen, that if you've the luck to have it in you, nothing does finer things than sentiment, things that nothing else in the world would do——"

George Wendern

“Go on,” they cried, “we are tired of talk.”

“And on that bit of desert, thousands of miles away, on which there’s not a stick of wood to light a fire, nor a blade of grass a sheep would look at, a gold mine has been discovered, one of the richest lodes that has been struck for years—not a pocket.”

The Jew’s thick voice interrupted, “Gold mines are not discovered in a minute——”

And Digby, trying to maintain his bullying tone added, “after eleven o’clock at night——”

“I knew that a chap had been worrying round trying to buy it, but I thought no more about it——” Wendern began.

“Well, I did,” Parker interrupted triumphantly, and his voice went down the table clear and strong, “so I’ve been doing some prospecting on my own account and saying nothing about it. I hope you’ll forgive the trespass, George, I told you I was up to something.”

“If you’re not dreaming——” Wendern was keeping a strong hold on himself.

“No, I’m not dreaming—and I’m not drunk, though I hope to be presently. The Melbourne Bank only finished up the expert’s report to-day and sent their cable a few hours ago, the others came sooner—look at them, look at them for yourselves,” he held them high. “One’s from the

Gave a Party

bank saying that you can draw on their branch here for pretty nearly anything you please—they've cabled it."

"Seems like business," said the Jew.

Parker left his place and went the length of the room to his friend, "Get out your cheque-book, George—pay them, and get rid of them, and then go back to your own property. I don't think much of this part of the world, its ways are not good enough,—nor its men either." He turned quickly to Sir John Carneford, "I make an exception for you, sir; I don't know who you are, but you strike me as being a gentleman and used to honest men, and I'd like to shake hands with you."

"Delighted," they gripped hands.

A happy smile came over Wendern's face, a little break was in his voice as he turned to the table, "This is astounding," he said, "as much to me as to you, my friends—for I suppose I may call you my friends now," he added cynically. Then, as he opened the cheque-book he saw the note with the little bunch of white flowers, "What's this?" he asked.

The guests looked puzzled for a minute, while he read the note, then crushed it in his hand, and, bewildered, stood looking at the flowers.

But Parker was impatient, "Come, George," he said, "you'd better hurry—what's up with you,

George Wendern

don't you understand, man, you're worth a million."

"You needn't go to Australia now," a voice shouted.

But he answered, "Yes, I shall. Back to the open, to begin all things; as they did when the gold in the earth had not yet been turned into money for the devil to play with—as he will play with it, till man has taken in a sense of its responsibility. That's what we all have to learn, my friends, what I'm going to think out——"

"Well, don't preach them a sermon, George, but write your cheques," Parker cried. "I got a list of the names and the sums from Dawson this afternoon,—though I daresay you've got one too in your pocket?"

Wendern nodded.

"All the same, I'd rather you took mine; I don't like doing things for nothing. Sit down and write and get rid of them," he insisted bluntly. "I believe they've got their transfers and certificates ready."

"This is the hour of my life," Wendern said, and did as he was told; a look of almost delirious happiness was in his eyes.

"A wonderful hour indeed," Sir John said.

"Drink to it," shouted Parker, going towards the door,—"drink to it, while I go and tell those

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chaps to play something more lively than the noise they are making up there."

Joe Parker had not learnt to appreciate Wagner. They had struck up "The Steersman's Song" again; it was changed for "The Merry Widow." He looked at Mrs. Berwick and nodded.

When they had gone, Mrs. Berwick went up to Wendern and took his hand; in the other he still held the note and flowers. "I want you to come with me," she said. They went through the orange-trees and out by the door. "Go across the lawn," she whispered; "you'll find her waiting for you under the sycamore-tree by the little gate."

She went in with a lagging step. But she was satisfied.

Katherine saw him coming through the darkness; the dim twinkling lights of the house behind him seemed to recede and the air to grow very still. She quailed as he drew near; she was still swathed in the black chiffon, as if she feared her hopes would turn to ashes.

He stood silently in front of her.

"Is it too late?"—her voice shook—"too late to be forgiven?"

"I didn't know that there was anything to forgive," he said coldly, "and I don't understand your change of front?"

"Oh!"

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“Have you thrown Kenton over too?” The last word pulled her together.

“Yes, I’ve thrown him over too,” she echoed. “There was no reason to go on when he had the new title and a great fortune.”

“Didn’t he love you?”

“I think he liked me,” she said in a dull even tone, as if she felt the interview was going to be hopeless. “And he saw that it would be a good thing to do. But he didn’t love me as you do—as you did,” she corrected herself. “I daresay he’ll marry the little actress.”

“Well, there’ll be some adjustment in that. And you mean that you never really cared about him?”

She was stung by his tone, but still she fought against it. She raised her head, and he saw her face plainly, as he had seen it that night at Brighton when the sea was whispering up to them.

“I thought I had made it clear,” she said. “I was in love with what seemed to be a fine thing to do—the right thing in return for all I had had given me. My head was in love with the deed and my heart with you. I played my head against my heart, and the head won.”

And again he stood looking at her without saying a word.

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She went on desperately, with her hands crossed on her chest. "It was you I loved. I have loved you from the first night we met. There has never been any one else in the world for me. But I wanted to be—or to do—something big. There was no self-sacrifice—women love self-sacrifice, don't you know that?—none in taking the man I loved; but there was—in what I was going to do, and it couldn't be done unless I gave myself with the money."

"You would have been a peeress," he said bitterly; "and there is your duty to your father's money, have you forgotten?"

"No, I have forgotten nothing—and I tried—I have felt and dreamt fine things—impossible things—just as you did." She stopped, and then as if she could say no more she added with a little sound that was like a sob, though there were no tears in her eyes, "I did what I did—but I kept him off—your kiss is still on my lips, George, and no man's shall ever come on top of it."

"And now?"

"I know the lawsuit has gone against you, that everything has gone wrong with you," she had evidently not heard of Sandway Strip; "but I could make everything right."

"No," he said quickly, and drew back as if he had been stung, "I don't want you to do the sort

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of thing for me that you wanted to do for Derbyshire."

"I only want you to be free," she pleaded humbly, "free to take me away—to the shanty you talked of, I don't want either of us to have more than will take us there? You said we might be two happy beggars by the wayside, going on to seek the magic way—it's what I want to do?"

"God knows I have loved you," he said slowly, as if it were all over.

"And I you," she answered. "I do now. I will all my life. But you can't forgive me," she stopped and turned to go.

Then he put his arms round her, "Beloved," he said, "so much has happened to-night—too much for any man to bear. But if you think I might risk death from excess of happiness—might pile it up still higher—"

She made a sound of joy, and he held her closer.

"I must go in," she said at last, "it is time."

"Come across and look at the dining-room for a moment."

The door was still open; the lights had been extinguished all but a stray one here and there. They stood outside, but they caught the breath of the orange-trees, and through them they could

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see in the dim room all the confusion and signs of the feast that had been.

“George Wendern gave a party,” she said. They laughed and turned back towards the house.

THE END.

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